

1986

Kunapipi 8 (2) 1986 Full Version

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Recommended Citation

Rutherford, Anna, Kunapipi 8 (2) 1986 Full Version, *Kunapipi*, 8(2), 1986.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol8/iss2/1>

Kunapipi 8 (2) 1986 Full Version

Abstract

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KUNAPIPI

IN
LOVING MEMORY
OF
A DEVOTED
HUSBAND
AND FATHER
ROYDEL
ANTHONY
BRIDGE
WHO DIED
ON NOVEMBER
195

"TO LIVE IN THE
HEARTS OF THOSE
WE LEAVE BEHIND
IS NOT TO DIE."

REST IN PEACE

Special West Indian Issue



KUNAPIPI

VOLUME VIII NUMBER 2
1986

Kunapipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet, and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

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SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

Scandinavia:

Individuals: Dkr100 per annum or

Dkr250 for three years

Institutions: Dkr150 per annum

Outside Scandinavia:

Individuals: £9 / US\$18 / AUD20 per annum or

£25 / US\$50 / AUD55 for three years

Institutions: £15 / US\$30 / AUD35 per annum

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ISSN 0106-5734

Kunapipi

VOLUME VIII NUMBER 2

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Kunapipi is published with assistance from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body, and the European branch of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies.

COVER: Pit-Pat, St Andrew's Church, Kingston, Jamaica. Photograph by Mike Andrews.

Kunapipi refers to the Australian aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.

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Do Angels Wear Brassieres?

Beccka down on her knees ending her goodnight prayers and Cherry telling her softly, 'And ask God to bless Auntie Mary.' Beccka vex that anybody could interrupt her private conversation with God so, say loud loud, 'No. Not praying for nobody that tek weh mi best glassy eye marble.'

'Beccka!' Cherry almost crying in shame, 'Shhhhhh! She wi hear you. Anyway she did tell you not to roll them on the floor when she have her headache.'

'A hear her already' — this is the righteous voice of Auntie Mary in the next room — 'But I am sure that God is not listening to the like of she. Blasphemous little wretch.'

She add the last part under her breath and with much lifting of her eyes to heaven she turn back to her nightly reading of the Imitations of Christ.

'Oooh Beccka, Rebecca, see what yu do,' Cherry whispering, crying in her voice.

Beccka just stick out her tongue at the world, wink at God who she know right now in the shape of a big fat anansi in a corner of the roof, kiss her mother and get into bed.

As soon as her mother gone into Auntie Mary room to try make it up and the whole night come down with whispering, Beccka whip the flash light from off the dressing table and settle down under the blanket to read. Beccka reading the Bible in secret from cover to cover not from any conviction the little wretch but because everybody round her always quoting that book and Beccka want to try and find flaw and question she can best them with.

Next morning Auntie Mary still vex. Auntie Mary out by the tank washing clothes and slapping them hard on the big rock. Fat sly-eye Katie from the next yard visiting and consoling her. Everybody visiting Auntie Mary these days and consoling her for the crosses she have to bear (that is Beccka they talking about). Fat Katie have a lot of time to walk

bout consoling because ever since hard time catch her son and him wife a town they come country to cotch with Katie. And from the girl walk through the door so braps! Katie claim she too sickly to do any washing or housework. So while the daughter-in-law beating suds at her yard she over by Auntie Mary washpan say she keeping her company. Right now she consoling about Beccka who (as she telling Auntie Mary) every decent-living upright Christian soul who is everybody round here except that Dorcas Waite about whom one should not dirty one's mouth to talk yes every clean living person heart go out to Auntie Mary for with all due respect to a sweet mannersable child like Cherry her daughter is the devil own pickney. Not that anybody saying a word about Cherry God know she have enough trouble on her head from she meet up that big hard back man though young little gal like that never shoulda have business with no married man. Katie take a breath long enough to ask question:

'But see here Miss Mary you no think Cherry buck up the devil own self when she carrying her? Plenty time that happen you know. Remember that woman over Allside that born the pickney with two head praise Jesus it did born dead. But see here you did know one day she was going down river to wash clothes and is the devil own self she meet. Yes'm. Standing right there in her way. She pop one big bawling before she faint weh and when everybody run come not a soul see him. Is gone he gone. But you no know where he did gone? No right inside that gal. Right inna her belly. And Miss Mary I telling you the living truth, just as the baby borning the midwife no see a shadow fly out of the mother and go right cross the room. She frighten so till she close her two eye tight and is so the devil escape.'

'Well I dont know about that. Beccka certainly dont born with no two head or nothing wrong with her. Is just hard ears she hard ears.'

'Den no so me saying?'

'The trouble is, Cherry is too soft to manage her. As you look hard at Cherry herself she start cry. She was never a strong child and she not a strong woman, her heart just too soft.'

'All the same right is right and there is only one right way to bring up a child and that is by bus' ass pardon my french Miss Mary but hard things call for hard words. That child should be getting blows from the day she born. Then she wouldn't be so force-ripe now. Who cant hear must feel for the rod and reproof bring wisdom but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame. Shame, Miss Mary.'

'Is true. And you know I wouldn't mind if she did only get into mischief Miss Katie but what really hurt me is how the child know so much and show off. Little children have no right to have so many things

in their brain. Guess what she ask me the other day nuh? — if me know how worms reproduce.'

'Say what, maam?'

'As Jesus is me judge. Me big woman she come and ask that. Reproduce I say. Yes Auntie Mary she say as if I stupid. When the man worm and the lady worm come together and they have baby. You know how it happen? — Is so she ask me.'

'What you saying maam? Jesus of Nazareth!'

'Yes, please. That is what the child ask me. Lightning come strike me dead if is lie I lie. In my own house. My own sister pickney. So help me I was so frighten that pickney could so impertinent that right away a headache strike me like autoclaps. But before I go lie down you see Miss Katie, I give her some licks so hot there she forget bout worm and reproduction.'

'In Jesus name!'

'Yes. Is all those books her father pack her up with. Book is all him ever good for. Rather than buy food put in the pickney mouth or help Cherry find shelter his only contribution is book. Nuh his character stamp on her. No responsibility that man ever have. Look how him just take off for foreign without a word even to his lawful wife and children much less Cherry and hers. God knows where it going to end.'

'Den Miss M. They really come to live with you for all time?'

'I dont know my dear. What are they to do? You know Cherry cant keep a job from one day to the next. From she was a little girl she so nervous she could never settle down long enough to anything. And you know since Papa and Mama pass away is me one she have to turn to. I tell you even if they eat me out of house and home and the child drive me to Bellevue I accept that this is the crosses that I put on this earth to bear ya Miss Katie.'

'Amen. Anyway dont forget what I was saying to you about the devil. The child could have a devil inside her. No pickney suppose to come facety and force-ripe so. You better ask the Archdeacon to check it out next time he come here.'

'Well. All the same Miss Katie she not all bad you know. Sometime at night when she ready to sing and dance and make up play and perform for us we laugh so till! And those times when I watch her I say to myself, this is really a gifted child.'

'Well my dear is your crosses. If is so you see it then is your sister child.'

'Aie. I have one hope in God and that is the child take scholarship exam and God know she so bright she bound to pass. And you know

what, Miss Katie, I put her name down for the three boarding school them that furthest from here. Make them teacher deal with her. That is what they get paid for.'

Beccka hiding behind the tank listening to the conversation as usual. She think about stringing a wire across the track to trip fat Katie but she feeling too lazy today. Fat Katie will get her comeuppance on Judgement Day for she wont able to run quick enough to join the heavenly hosts. Beccka there thinking of fat Katie huffing and puffing arriving at the pasture just as the company of the faithful in their white robes are rising as one body on a shaft of light. She see Katie a-clutch at the hem of the gown of one of the faithful and miraculously, slowly, slowly, Katie start to rise. But her weight really too much and with a tearing sound that spoil the solemn moment the hem tear way from the garment and Katie fall back to earth with a big buff, shouting and wailing for them to wait on her. Beccka snickering so hard at the sight she have to scoot way quick before Auntie Mary and Katie hear her. They think the crashing about in the cocoa walk is mongoose.

Beccka in Auntie Mary room — which is forbidden — dress up in Auntie Mary bead, Auntie Mary high heel shoes, Auntie Mary shawl, and Auntie Mary big floppy hat which she only wear to wedding — all forbidden. Beccka mincing and prancing prancing and mincing in front of the three-way adjustable mirror in Auntie Mary vanity she brought all the way from Cuba with her hard earned money. Beccka seeing herself as a beautiful lady on the arms of a handsome gentleman who look just like her father. They about to enter a night club neon sign flashing for Beccka know this is the second wickedest thing a woman can do. At a corner table lit by Chinese lantern soft music playing Beccka do the wickedest thing a woman can do — she take a drink. Not rum. One day Beccka went to wedding with Auntie Mary and sneak a drink of rum and stay sick for two days. Beccka thinking of all the bright-colour drink she see advertise in the magazine Cherry get from a lady she use to work for in town a nice yellow drink in a tall frosted glass...

'Beccka, Rebecca O my God!' That is Cherry rushing into the room and wailing. 'You know she wi mad like hell if she see you with her things you know you not to touch her things.'

Cherry grab Auntie Mary things from off Beccka and fling them back into where she hope is the right place, adjust the mirror to what she hope is the right angle, and pray just pray that Auntie Mary wont find out that Beccka was messing with her things. Again. Though Auntie Mary so

absolutely neat she always know if a pin out of place. 'O God Beccka,' Cherry moaning.

Beccka stripped of her fancy clothes dont pay no mind to her mother fluttering about her. She take the story in her head to the room next door though here the mirror much too high for Beccka to see the sweep of her gown as she does the third wickedest thing a woman can do which is dance all night.

Auntie Mary is a nervous wreck and Cherry weeping daily in excitement. The Archdeacon is coming. Auntie Mary so excited she cant sit cant stand cant do her embroidery cant eat she forgetting things the house going to the dog she dont even notice that Beccka been using her lipstick. Again. The Archdeacon coming Wednesday to the churches in the area and afterwards — as usual — Archdeacon sure to stop outside Auntie Mary gate even for one second — as usual — to get two dozen of Auntie Mary best roses and a bottle of pimento dram save from Christmas. And maybe just this one time Archdeacon will give in to Auntie Mary pleading and step inside her humble abode for tea. Just this one time.

Auntie Mary is due this honour at least once because she is head of Mothers Union and though a lot of them jealous and back-biting her because Archdeacon never stop outside their gate even once let them say anything to her face.

For Archdeacon's certain stop outside her gate Auntie Mary scrub the house from top to bottom put up back the freshly laundered Christmas Curtains and the lace tablecloth and the newly starch doilies and the anti-macassars clean all the windows in the house get the thick hibiscus hedge trim so you can skate across the top wash the dog whitewash every rock in the garden and the trunk of every tree paint the gate polish the silver and bring out the crystal cake-plate and glasses she bring from Cuba twenty-five years ago and is saving for her old age. Just in case Archdeacon can stop for tea Auntie Mary bake a fruitcake a upside-down cake a three-layer cake a chocolate cake for she dont know which he prefer also some coconut cookies for although the Archdeacon is an Englishman dont say he dont like his little Jamaican dainties. Everything will be pretty and nice for the Archdeacon just like the American lady she did work for in Cuba taught her to make them.

The only thing that now bothering Auntie Mary as she give a last look over her clean and well ordered household is Beccka, dirty Beccka right now sitting on the kitchen steps licking out the mixing bowls. The thought of Beccka in the same house with Archdeacon bring on one of

Auntie Mary headache. She think of asking Cherry to take Beccka somewhere else for the afternoon when Archdeacon coming but poor Cherry work so hard and is just excited about Archdeacon coming. Auntie Mary dont have the courage to send Beccka to stay with anyone for nobody know what that child is going to come out with next and a lot of people not so broadmind as Auntie Mary. She pray that Beccka will get sick enough to have to stay in bed she — O God forgive her but is for a worthy cause — she even consider drugging the child for the afternoon. But she dont have the heart. And anyway she dont know how. So Auntie Mary take two asprin and a small glass of tonic wine and pray hard that Beccka will vanish like magic on the afternoon that Archdeacon visit.

Now Archdeacon here and Beccka and everybòdy in their very best clothes. Beccka thank God also on her best behaviour which can be very good so far in fact she really look like a little angel she so clean and behaving.

In fact Archdeacon is quite taken with Beccka and more and more pleased that this is the afternoon he decide to consent to come inside Auntie Mary parlour for one little cup of tea. Beccka behaving so well and talking so nice to the Archdeacon Auntie Mary feel her heart swell with pride and joy over everything. Beccka behaving so beautiful in fact that Auntie Mary and Cherry dont even think twice about leaving her to talk to Archdeacon in the parlour while they out in the kitchen preparing tea.

By now Beccka and the Archdeacon exchanging Bible knowledge. Beccka asking him question and he trying his best to answer but they never really tell him any of these things in theological college. First he go ask Beccka if she is a good little girl. Beccka say yes she read her Bible every day. Do you now say the Archdeacon, splendid. Beccka smile and look shy.

‘Tell me my little girl, is there anything in the Bible you would like to ask me about?’

‘Yes sir. Who in the Bible wrote big?’

‘Who in the Bible wrote big. My dear child!’

This wasnt the kind of question Archdeacon expecting but him always telling himself how he have rapport with children so he decide to confess his ignorance.

‘Tell me, who?’

‘Paul!’ Beccka shout.

‘Paul?’

‘Galations six eleven «See with how large letters I write onto you with mine own hands».’

‘Ho Ho Ho Ho’ Archdeacon laugh. — ‘Well done. Try me with another one.’

Beccka decide to ease him up this time.

‘What animal saw an angel?’

‘What animal saw an angel? My word. What animal...of course. Balaam’s Ass.’

‘Yes you got it.’

Beccka jumping up and down she so excited. She decide to ask the Archdeacon a trick questions her father did teach her.

‘What did Adam and Eve do when they were driven out of the garden?’

‘Hm,’ the Archdeacon sputtered but could not think of a suitable answer.

‘Raise Cain ha ha ha ha ha.’

‘They raised Cain Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho.’

The Archdeacon promise himself to remember that one to tell the Deacon. All the same he not feeling strictly comfortable. It really dont seem dignified for an Archdeacon to be having this type of conversation with an eleven-year-old girl. But Beccka already in high gear with the next question and Archdeacon tense himself.

‘Who is the shortest man in the Bible?’

Archdeacon groan.

‘Peter. Because him sleep on his watch. Ha Ha Ha.’

‘Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho.’

‘What is the smallest insect in the Bible?’

‘The widow’s mite,’ Archdeacon shout.

‘The wicked flee,’ Beccka cry.

‘Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho Ho.’

Archdeacon laughing so hard now he starting to cough. He cough and cough till the coughing bring him to his senses. He there looking down the passage where Auntie Mary gone and wish she would hurry come back. He sputter a few time into his handkerchief, wipe his eye, sit up straight and assume his most religious expression. Even Beccka impress.

‘Now Rebecca. Hm. You are a very clever very entertaining little girl. Very. But what I had in mind were questions that are a bit more serious. Your aunt tells me you are being prepared for confirmation. Surely you must have some questions about doctrine hm, religion, that puzzle you. No serious questions?’

Beccka look at Archdeacon long and hard. ‘Yes,’ she say at long last in

a small voice. Right away Archdeacon sit up straighter.

‘What is it my little one?’

Beckka screwing up her face in concentration.

‘Sir, what I want to know is this for I cant find it in the Bible. Please sir, do angels wear brassieres?’

Auntie Mary just that minute coming through the doorway with a full tea tray with Cherry carrying another big tray right behind her. Enough food and drink for ten Archdeacon. Auntie Mary stop braps in the doorway with fright when she hear Beckka question. She stop so sudden that Cherry bounce into her and spill a whole pitcher of cold drink all down Auntie Mary back. As the coldness hit her Auntie Mary jump and half her tray throw way on the floor milk and sugar and sandwiches a rain down on Archdeacon. Archdeacon jump up with his handkerchief and start mop himself and Auntie Mary at the same time he trying to take the tray from her. Auntie Mary at the same time trying to mop up the Archdeacon with a napkin in her mortification not even noticing how Archdeacon relieve that so much confusion come at this time. Poor soft-hearted Cherry only see that her sister whole life ruin now she dont yet know the cause run and sit on the kitchen stool and throw kitchen cloth over her head and sit there bawling and bawling in sympathy.

Beckka win the scholarship to high school. She pass so high she getting to go to the school of Auntie Mary choice which is the one that is furthest away. Beckka vex because she dont want go no boarding school with no heap of girl. Beckka dont want to go to no school at all.

Everyone so please with Beckka. Auntie Mary even more please when she get letter from the headmistress setting out Rules and Regulations. She only sorry that the list not longer for she could think of many things she could add. She get another letter setting out uniform and right away Auntie Mary start sewing. Cherry take the bus to town one day with money coming from God know where for the poor child dont have no father to speak of and she buy shoes and socks and underwear and hair ribbon and towels and toothbrush and a suitcase for Beckka. Beckka normally please like puss with every new thing vain like peacock in ribbons and clothes. Now she hardly look at them. Beckka thinking. She dont want to go to no school. But how to get out of it. When Beckka think done she decide to run away and find her father who like a miracle have job now in a circus. And as Beckka find him so she get job in the circus as a tight-rope walker and in spangles and tights lipstick and powder (her own) Beckka perform every night before a cheering crowd in a blaze of

light. Beccka and the circus go right round the world. Every now and then, dress up in furs and hats like Auntie Mary wedding hat Beccka come home to visit Cherry and Auntie Mary. She arrive in a chauffeur-driven limousine pile high with luggage. Beccka shower them with presents. The whole village. For fat Katie Beccka bring a years supply of diet pill and a exercise machine just like the one she see advertise in the magazine the lady did give to Cherry.

Now Beccka ready to run away. In the books, the picture always show children running away with their things tied in a bundle on a stick. The stick easy. Beccka take one of the walking stick that did belong to Auntie Mary's dear departed. Out of spite she take Auntie Mary silk scarf to wrap her things in for Auntie Mary is to blame for her going to school at all. She pack in the bundle Auntie Mary lipstick Auntie Mary face powder and a pair of Auntie Mary stockings for she need these for her first appearance as a tight-rope walker. She take a slice of cake, her shiny eye marble and a yellow nicol which is her best taa in case she get a chance to play in the marble championship of the world. She also take the Bible. She want to find some real hard question for the Archdeacon next time he come to Auntie Mary house for tea.

When Auntie Mary and Cherry busy sewing her school clothes Beccka take off with her bundle and cut across the road into the field. Mr O'Connor is her best friend and she know he wont mind if she walk across his pasture. Mr O'Connor is her best friend because he is the only person Beccka can hold a real conversation with. Beccka start to walk toward the mountain that hazy in the distance. She plan to climb the mountain and when she is high enough she will look for a sign that will lead her to her father. Beccka walk and walk through the pasture divided by stone wall and wooden gates which she climb. Sometime a few trees tell her where a pond is. But it is very lonely. All Beccka see is john crow and cow and cattle egret blackbird and parrotlets that scream at her from the trees. But Beccka dont notice them. Her mind busy on how Auntie Mary and Cherry going to be sad now she gone and she composing letter she will write to tell them she safe and she forgive them everything. But the sun getting too high in the sky and Beccka thirstry. She eat the cake but she dont have water. Far in the distance she see a bamboo clump and hope is round a spring with water. But when she get to the bamboo all it offer is shade. In fact the dry bamboo leaves on the ground so soft and inviting that Beccka decide to sit and rest for a while. Is sleep Beccka sleep. When she wake she see a stand above her four horse leg and when she raise up and look, stirrups, boots and sitting atop the horse her best friend, Mr O'Connor.

'Well Beccka, taking a long walk?'

'Yes sir.'

'Far from home eh?'

'Yes sir.'

'Running away?'

'Yes sir.'

'Hm. What are you taking with you?'

Beccka tell him what she have in the bundle. Mr O'Connor shock.

'What, no money?'

'Oooh!'

Beccka shame like anything for she never remember anything about money.

'Well you need money for running away you know. How else you going to pay for trains and planes and taxis and buy ice cream and pindar cake?'

Beccka didn't think about any of these things before she run away. But now she see that is sense Mr O'Connor talking but she dont know what to do. So the two of them just stand up there for a while. They thinking hard.

'You know Beccka if I was you I wouldnt bother with the running away today. Maybe they dont find out you gone yet. So I would go back home and wait until I save enough money to finance my journey.'

Beccka love how that sound. To finance my journey. She think about that a long time. Mr O'Connor say, 'Tell you what. Why dont you let me give you a ride back and you can pretend this was just a practice and you can start saving your money to run away properly next time.'

Beccka look at Mr O'Connor. He looking off into the distance and she follow where he gazing and when she see the mountain she decide to leave it for another day. All the way back riding with Mr O'Connor Beccka thinking and thinking and her smile getting bigger and bigger. Beccka cant wait to get home to dream up all the tricky question she could put to a whole school full of girl. Not to mention the teachers. Beccka laughing for half the way home. Suddenly she say —

'Mr Connor, you know the Bible?'

'Well Beccka I read my Bible every day so I should think so.'

'Promise you will answer a question.'

'Promise.'

'Mr Connor, do angels wear brassieres?'

'Well Beccka, as far as I know only the lady angels need to.'

Beccka laugh cant done. Wasnt that the answer she was waiting for?

'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?' is from *Summer Lightning and Other Stories*. See p. 114 for review.

Olive Senior

INTERVIEW

Anna Rutherford interviewed Olive Senior in London in October 1986.

The child features prominently in your stories. Would you like to say why this is so and perhaps tell us something of your own childhood?

I come from a very large family. My father was a small farmer and I was born in a small, very backward village in Jamaica. At an early age, about the age of four, I was sent to live with my mother's relatives who lived in another parish in a completely different social setting. They had a cattle and citrus property and were what I suppose we would call 'landed gentry'. There, I was an only child. I was shuffled back and forth between these two households for most of my childhood until I went away to high school. I ended up feeling quite alienated from both backgrounds because it was very difficult for me to make the adjustments between the two worlds. I was an extremely lonely child and I think a lot of the stories in *Summer Lightning*, which represent my first work of fiction, also represent an attempt on my part to come to grips with those aspects of my childhood which were painful but which were also significant in shaping the adult I have become, including the fact that I have become a writer. Because at an early age I acquired what I consider a most requisite tool for the writer and that is the ability to deal with solitude. What I have published so far is not autobiographical but it does represent a distillation of my own feelings, my own experiences, my empathy with children who are isolated from the adult world represented by the family, as I was.

When you described the two worlds you moved between, they appeared very different. Could you tell us a little more about them?

Yes. But perhaps I should say that this idea of children being raised in more than one household is very much a part of the whole Caribbean

ethos. It's not unusual at all. A large number of children are raised by people other than their parents.

To return to my own situation. In being constantly shifted between two households I think I was also pretty much being shifted between the two extremes of a continuum based on race, colour and class in Jamaica. The village was largely black and strongly African in character, the whole folk culture was very strong there. There I had a lot of freedom to move about and explore my immediate environment which I wasn't allowed to do in my other life. Although I grew up in a household where puritanical religious values were strongly defended — and this was extremely painful to me from my earliest childhood — I did relate to the rest of the village. I went to the village school, the church, the clinic, took part in concerts and plays, and we were never allowed to feel that we were superior to other people. Like most rural children of my generation the notion of implicit respect for all adults was ingrained in me and I developed a way of evaluating the worth of people in non-material terms. Even though people in the village were poverty-stricken and largely illiterate, many had high status roles which we recognised — Mister Robbie was a great hunter, S'ta Beatrice knew everything about bush medicine, Mass Tom knew all the old-time stories, Brother Sal grew the biggest yams, Mama Coolie was the village midwife, and so on. Every adult had to be given some sort of title — we were never allowed to call 'big people' by their first names — without, as we would say, a 'handle'. In other words, in the village we all inhabited a particular universe which operated according to certain values that were shared by all, where people were all intensely individualistic, nevertheless intensely alive. It all contrasted very strongly with the pallid pseudo-European gentility of my 'other' existence.

At the other extreme there was my 'adopted' family which represented the European element in Jamaican culture. In that world I was being socialised to respect European values exclusively. People in Jamaica who were light-skinned, white, near white, in those days looked down on people who were black, who were African and, as part of that process, they also 'low-rated' or discounted the indigenous culture of Jamaica. So all this made it very difficult to shift between the two worlds, because they represented the two extremes, the polarities of colonial society.

Did the fact that you are very light-skinned present problems for you in the village world? Were you accepted?

Yes. There might have been problems but I wasn't conscious of them. Because we were poor, we lived as a part of the village. I didn't really

have a consciousness of race; I came to this kind of consciousness later when I went to high school.

*I am teaching a course on Caribbean literature this term and one of the things that strike my Danish students, who come from a very homogeneous society, is the racial mixture of the Caribbean and the tensions between the races. Did you not feel these tensions?*²

I felt tensions, but I think I was far more conscious of class tensions than of race. In terms of the hierarchy my adopted family had status because they had land and they were also light-skinned, whereas though my parents were light-skinned, they were poor, so their status was quite different and so both related to darker-skinned people in different ways. It's a very complex situation in Jamaica; I don't think race can be separated from class and nowadays I would suggest that class is a far more important determinant of all kinds of things than is race. At the personal level, of family, friends, colleagues, at the level of personal interaction, race has never been a significant factor.

How isolated was the world in which you grew up?

Very. We were isolated even from the nearest town. The village I grew up in had no running water, no electricity, one or two people might have had a radio. There was only a dirt road and even a trip to the nearest town was a considerable undertaking. There was virtually no transportation. The train was our main means of communication and then you had to get the mail van to the railway station which was about twelve miles away. So even the rest of Jamaica seemed very far away. People think of us islanders as all living by the sea. I grew up in the mountains. I never saw the sea until I was pretty old. It was a very isolated kind of existence.

Funnily enough the kind of metropolitan contacts that a lot of us had was with Latin America because a lot of people in my background had been emigrants to Panama, to Costa Rica and the United States. They had been among the wave of migrants who had left the Caribbean in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. In fact my adopted family, my great uncle and my great aunts had gone to Panama during the time of the building of the Panama Canal and had later gone to the United States. So in a sense the contact with the outside world was a contact with the Americas though we were socialized to revere 'Mother England', 'Missis Queen' and all things British.

In the world you have just described there were obviously not a lot of books.

No. There was of course the Bible because religion was very significant to these societies and still is. There was also Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and uplifting moral material like that. I learned to read at an early age, and reading really became a refuge from the world around me which I found hard to cope with. I can't recall as a child having children's books. The only children's book I can remember having was *Alice in Wonderland*, though there might have been others, but I have no clear memory of them. Apart from school books, people didn't go out and buy books for children because that would have been a luxury. I ended up reading very strange adult literature from an early age, simply because that was the only thing around to read.

For example?

At my mother's house I think we only had religious books. At my grand-aunt's I remember I used to read the newspaper every day for grand-uncle. My grand-aunt also had a set of books which she had brought with her from the United States, which meant that by the time I came along they might have been forty years old. They were a sort of romantic literature of her era which I consumed, Marie Corelli, that sort of thing. I loved it. I was so inexperienced as a person I'm sure I didn't understand most of it, but it was reading material. I read anything I could lay my hands on.

How did you come to write yourself?

As a small child I first wanted to be an artist and I'm still interested in drawing and painting though I have never pursued art seriously. Then at a very early age, for some strange reason, I decided I was going to be a journalist. I'm not even sure I knew what a journalist was, but I knew that writing was somewhere in my future. I used to write things as a child — poems, stories, and at school I used to win prizes for all kinds of things, essays, poetry, but I only started to write seriously when I was at university in Canada. That for me represented a period when my own identity crisis came to a head and I started writing as a means of trying to integrate myself, trying to make a whole person out of a very fragmented past; so writing served a largely therapeutic function at that stage. I started to write *out* some of the things that had been hurtful and painful to

me. I have gradually moved from that early, highly subjective stage to a more conscious objective pursuit of writing as a craft.

Does that mean that some of the stories from Summer Lightning were written many years ago?

Yes. Most of them. Most of the stories in that collection represent the very earliest I wrote. In fact there is only one story in there that was written fairly recently, meaning late seventies, and that's 'Country of the One Eyed God', but the rest of them are from the sixties, mid-sixties, early seventies.

Very often in your stories you have the sense that the child feels threatened by the adult world. Does this reflect your own feelings when you were a child?

I'm not sure that 'threatened' is the word, but certainly as a child I felt totally at the mercy of forces outside my control. I never felt secure, had no sense of belonging or any real identity with adults, including my own family. I think I was an unusual child, probably a strange child, and I'm not sure anyone made any attempt to understand me. People wanted me to conform to their notion of what the 'good child' was, and I don't think that is what I was at all. I had this tremendous sense from a very early age of being in constant rebellion, of my relationships with adults as being one of struggle against them. I felt that my freedom was being compromised and taken away from me in most of my encounters with adults, including my own parents. I should perhaps add that a lot of this rebellion was not overt, it was internalised or expressed in oblique ways. I suppose nowadays I would have been classified as hostile.

You commented the other day on forms of oppression and it would appear from your comments and your work that you found the oppression of the church particularly damaging. Is that so?

Yes. I felt more oppressed by religion as a child than I did by anything else. A very restricted, narrow kind of Christianity combined with poverty is, I think, a ruthless combination, in that they both attack the spirit, they are both anti-life, they are both anti-freedom, soul-destroying as far as I am concerned. My whole childhood, adolescence, early adulthood were spent — wasted, I feel — trying to transcend these.

My students have commented on the seeming power and influence of the Church and have at the same time noted the fact, not in a moralistic way, that so many of the people live together 'outside of marriage', and they wondered at what seems in some way to be a contradiction. Could you say something about this?

The Caribbean family system is very complex and cannot be judged according to European values. The churches of course would prefer to have all their flock nicely married off, but... To understand the low level of marriage in Caribbean society one has to relate it to sociological, economic and historical factors. The fact is that different members of society adhere to different value systems. For upper and middle class people and some ethnic groups, such as Indians and Chinese, the nuclear family model is the ideal and the one prevailing. For poor Afro-Caribbean people it might be the ideal but is not often regarded as attainable because the main requirement of that family structure, the role of father as breadwinner, cannot always be a reality. Caribbean people have in fact institutionalised other family forms which reflect the reality of their condition. For poor Afro-Caribbean women what is important is not so much marriage as the fact that they must have children. The historical dimension is that during the system of plantation slavery which prevailed for most of our history, the father had no official role to play in the family, the child belonged to the slave owner and the mother was the only officially recognised parent. Marriage was not possible under this system and has not, therefore, become institutionalised in the 150 years since Emancipation.

This leads on to the question of the women in the society. Looked at from our point of view the women seem to have a very rough deal.

Caribbean women have had to be very strong because they have had to assume the role of both mother and father, because the father is usually absent for one reason or other. There are a lot of contradictions in her situation. The myth of the black matriarch projects an image of the Caribbean woman as strong and powerful, and she does play a powerful role in the family, even though that role might be forced on her because of an absence of male support. But the myth disguises the fact of her powerlessness in the wider society. The majority of working women are in low-paid, low-status jobs such as domestic service, and women, especially young women, experience the highest rates of unemployment. Women have little share in the formal power structures although they are the ones who are the domestic managers. Caribbean women shoulder the

most tremendous burdens. There is something sacrificial yet noble about the lives of poor women especially because they end up investing everything in their children. But there is now growing a new generation of well educated, upwardly mobile young women, so maybe this will herald a change in women's attitudes and statuses.

I have just read an article which argued that both Jean Rhys and Phyllis Allfrey presented their female characters as victims and the writer endeavoured to show that these white women had an affinity with the coloured population, both groups being colonized by the capitalist patriarchy. Do you have any comment?

I would really have to read the article. I believe that the degree of oppression experienced by women is directly related to race and class. Upper class women would be playing the traditional role of wife and mother and possibly not work at all; they might be under some form of tyranny in the domestic sphere, but they wouldn't have the economic stresses or strains that the black peasant or working class woman would have.

I find it hard to identify with most of Jean Rhys's work because it seems so alien from the Caribbean. Apart from *Wide Sargasso Sea* and now the autobiographical material, I don't know that there is a strong Caribbean element; it seems far more European to me. The difference between her women and Caribbean women is that the latter group don't act as if they're victimized. They're very positive, no matter how poor they are. They're into struggle, whereas Jean Rhys's heroines give up very easily. That's what Caribbean women don't do. The majority of Caribbean women are affirmative, they're fighters. So that kind of female is not one we can identify with. Caribbean women are powerful in the sense that they are positive for the most part, which doesn't mean they don't allow themselves to be exploited by the system or by men, which is in fact the paradox about them: that they are often very weak in their relationships with men but very strong otherwise.

Do you have any theories about why they are weak in their relationships with men?

Part of it has to do with the fact that the 'powerful' Caribbean woman is still socialised according to traditional lines — to defer to men, to accept patriarchic structures and values, even though she might be entirely independent of male support. Our socialization still continues to reinforce the stereotyped female image which girls still internalise but which might be at odds with the reality of women's lives in the Carib-

bean. Women are still trapped in the thinking of their mothers and grandmothers and somehow haven't yet been able to develop a sense of their own self-worth in their relationships with men. That is a very personal opinion and is only a small part of the story...

I am writing a book on the roles and status of Caribbean women in which I am attempting to examine some of these issues. The book will be largely based on the research findings from a three-year multi-disciplinary Women in the Caribbean Research Project which operated from the University of the West Indies in Barbados. In fact some of the findings of this research is now being published by the Institute of Social and Economic Research and it is important because this is the first extensive woman-centred piece of research from the English-speaking Caribbean. I think it will contribute greatly to a better understanding of the Caribbean woman — including her relationships with men.

In your talk at the conference (Caribbean Writers' Conference, Commonwealth Institute, London, October 1986) you said that you had very little reading material as a child. But still most writers have some other writers who have influenced them. Are there any you could mention?

Well, I'm not conscious of whatever influences there might have been before my early teens. I went to high school in the town of Montego Bay and there was a library there and I started doing a lot of reading, and of course at school English literature was an important area of study. But the earliest writers that impressed me greatly that I can remember are the writers who are now referred to as the 'Southern Gothic School', people like Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote. I distinctly remember when I read their works how moved I was because for the first time I realized there were people like myself; because they do write of young people who are at odds with the world around them, and they write of societies that are constricting and narrow, so I identified very strongly with a lot of their characters and with a lot of what was happening in their world. Those writers represent for me my earliest identifiable influences. Later on there were many other influences from English and American literature.

I was exposed to Caribbean literature at a much later date because when I went to school we weren't taught Caribbean literature or Caribbean history. This was in the closing days of the colonial era, so I came very late to reading Caribbean writers. I did read Vic Reid's *New Day* when I was at school and I think that had a profound impact on all of us, on my generation. And of course we all recited Louise Bennett's

poetry, but we did not recognise Louise Bennett's work as 'literature'. It wasn't until Mervyn Morris wrote his seminal essay 'On Reading Louise Bennett Seriously', which was published in *Jamaica Journal* (Vol. I, Dec. 1967), that people began to consider that Louise Bennett who was writing in dialect which we were taught was 'bad talking' was writing 'literature'. I came to Caribbean literature very late. In fact up to when I started to write in Canada I had read very little Caribbean material.

You said there were very few books, newspapers or radios in the village in which you grew up. Does that mean that perhaps your strongest influence at that time was the oral tradition?

I think that the oral tradition has profoundly influenced me as a writer because I grew up in a society where the spoken word was important. We created our own entertainment, every night as a child living in the village I remember an adult told us stories — Duppy stories, Anancy stories, or whatever, or we told each other stories. There was also something dramatic in the quality of real life, people would narrate everyday events in a very dramatic way. As a child I didn't talk much, but I listened a lot and I think the results of that listening have come out in my work. To me the sound of the voice is extremely important. I try to utilize the voice a great deal in my work and more and more find that what is happening is that the voice is taking over. In other words, I am more and more concerned that my characters should speak directly to the reader and therefore I am dealing almost purely in narrative, in letting people tell their own story. I suppose fundamentally I'm a story teller and I attribute that to my early experience of growing up in an oral culture.

Another feature that struck my students when reading Caribbean literature was the prevalence of physical violence.

I think we do live in a violent society. It starts with domestic violence, it starts with violence against the child. Children are raised very very strictly and are beaten, though not so much as they used to be. There is a certain amount of brutality directed at children. A lot of it is unintentional. People are just perpetuating the way they themselves were raised. And then there's also a lot of violence in the home; not necessarily physical violence, though there is that too. People are very aggressive in the language they employ and in the way they deal with one another. And of course then it goes out into the street. We all grew up with this sense of one group of people threatening another; there is a whole

manipulation of the weaker people by the more powerful, and in our society a lot of the powerful people in the domestic situation are the men. I grew up with a great consciousness of this, with people being aggressive towards one another. In a way of course it's a reflection of the social structures in which people find themselves, because if a man is unable to support his family because he can't get work, he's going to come home and take it out on his wife. The economic conditions contribute to a lot of what happens in the home and ultimately on the street. And yet, having said all this, I also feel — and I believe that this also comes out in my work — that there is in our society still a great deal of love, of caring, of good fellowship, of kinship and friendship bonds which are strong and lasting. Jamaica is still a society of great spirituality, of great psychic energy. A lot of creative artists feel this — and this is probably why we stay.

You have also had a book of poetry published. Do you have a preference for either genre?

I write prose or poetry as the material dictates, though what I feel is happening now is that my prose and poetry are getting closer together. I'm not a prolific writer, I don't really have the time to devote to writing, but what I'm working on now are narratives. Some are long, so they are stories; some are short, in poetic form, so they are poems.

The Power of the Victim.

A Study of *Quartet*, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* and *Voyage in the Dark* by Jean Rhys

A sentence she had read somewhere floated fantastically into her mind: 'It's so nice to think that the little thing enjoys it too,' said the lady, watching her cat playing with a mouse.¹

It is easy to dismiss Jean Rhys's heroines as passive victims of men. Yet this passivity, so disturbing to the reader, is also a form of rebellion. Lacking the power to change their lives in a society which offered women without family or money few options, her women negate themselves. They say no not only to self-definition and an orderly life but to the bourgeois code, 'the soul-destroying middle' (p. 20). And it is with the soul, in particular the female soul, that Jean Rhys is most concerned.

Rhys's heroines suffer terrible humiliations but they share a moral victory. However pathetic her position, the Rhys heroine is at least no victim of guilt. She has relinquished what assertive power she may possess to her aggressor and thus remains on the side of the angels, those outsiders who refuse to cooperate with or who are victims of the establishment. In his introduction to *The Left Bank*, Rhys's first collection of short stories, Ford Madox Ford refers to Rhys's 'passion for stating the case of the underdog'. Indeed, the Rhys heroine identifies with those who inhabit the 'underworld' of London, Paris and the West Indies: the prostitute, the criminal, the artist and the blacks. In these sub-cultures she can escape at least temporarily from the Nobadaddy outside to a sensual landscape, the externalization of the female psyche.

The Rhys heroine is literally a born loser, her inherent weakness apparent in her face and body. Marya of *Quartet* has a short face, 'her

long eyes slanted upwards towards the temples and were gentle and oddly remote in expression' (p. 7). Early on in *Quartet*, Miss De Solla describes Marya as 'a decorative little person, decorative but strangely pathetic' (p. 8). Julia in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* has similar features: 'Her eyes gave her away. By her eyes and the deep circles under them, you saw that she was a dreamer, that she was vulnerable — too vulnerable ever to make a success of a career of chance.'² Julia's hands are 'slender, narrow palmed with very long fingers, like the hands of an oriental'. The typical Rhys heroine, small, physically fragile, languid and exotic in the English context, contrasts sharply with middle class women, particularly Englishwomen, who are described as strong, coarse, mannish. The Heidlers in *Quartet* are 'fresh, sturdy people' (p. 11); Lois Hidler has 'the voice of a well-educated young male' (p. 11). In that Lois Hidler and the others of her ilk have been coopted by the patriarchy, they have in a sense become men, with all the assumed strengths, and lack of grace and sensuality. For Rhys's dichotomy is not necessarily between men and women but between the powerful and the powerless.

The Rhys heroine has frequent bouts of sickness in large part because she cannot adjust to the English winters, a metaphor for the chill of that society. Anna, the heroine of *Voyage in the Dark*, suffers from cold hands and feet. Her friend remarks 'She's always cold. She can't help it. She was born in a hot place.'³ The delicate flower of a tropical island hothouse, transplanted to the frigid North, lacks even the physical defences necessary for survival.

That the battle for strength has been won from the outset, the Rhys heroine acknowledges through her passivity. Although Marya in *Quartet* senses the disaster ahead if she takes refuge with the Heidlers, she allows them and her unwitting husband to talk her into the move. Penniless, her husband in prison, Marya may have no choice, but she also feels too vulnerable to stand alone. Mr Mackenzie observes of Julia that she 'was a female without the instinct of self preservation' (p. 20). Although Julia is older and more of a fighter than either Marya or Anna, she is easily bullied by the forces of her ex-lover and his lawyer.

When she thought of the combinations of Mr Mackenzie and Maitre Legros, all sense of reality deserted her and it seemed to her that there were no limits at all to their joint powers of defeating and hurting her. Together the two perfectly represented organized society, in which she had no place and against which she had not a dog's chance. (p. 17)

Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* is defeated by a similar pair of men, her lover Walter Jeffries and his cruel friend Vincent. Anna, younger and more

naive than Julia, is only dimly aware of the powers which will crush her. When she reveals to Vincent that she toured in a chorus in places like Southsea, Walter admonishes her: 'You shouldn't give yourself away like that' (p. 75).

When the inevitable happens and the Rhys heroine is left by her lover, she mourns by inaction, by retreating to her room, her drink, her memories. Successive landladies wonder at the young woman who stays in bed all day. 'The landlady thought to herself that it was extraordinary a life like that, not to be believed. Always alone in her bedroom. But it's the life of a dog' (*After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* p. 9). Even in good times Rhys's heroines spend most of their time sipping Pernods in cafes or lying in dingy hotel rooms brooding about past and present difficulties, fantasizing about beautiful clothes, food and lovers. They watch and judge but rarely engage others. Appropriately in these novels about passivity, the plot is minimal; interior monologue substitutes for action.

The Rhys heroine's professions — chorus girl, mannequin, model and even mistress — are ones in which she must be self-effacing. Her body is used to model clothes for someone else's body, as part of a backdrop for the star in a show, or as bait to catch men and satisfy their sexual demands. Yet these were the sort of choices available to unmarried women who were neither highly educated nor rich. And in a sense, these jobs parody the role of the married middle class woman who gains the security the Rhys heroine lacks by being a domestically 'decorative person'.

Appearance is thus of paramount importance to Rhys's heroines:

to stop making up would have been a confession of age and weariness.... It would have been the first step on the road that ended in looking like that woman on the floor above — a woman who had dyed hair which had grown out for two inches into a hideous pepper and salt grey. The woman had a humble, cringing manner. She had discovered that, having neither money nor virtue she had better be humble if she knew what was good for her. (*After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, p. 11)

Julia's terror at the thought of becoming this woman is evident in the obsessive way she makes up. Her lover thinks she looks furtive and calculating when she powders her face. Julia's makeup has become a mask, a weapon in a battle she is losing with age. When a young man who had been following her turns away because he sees how old she is, Julia is shattered. Julia's emotional and social deterioration is closely paralleled by a physical one; by the end of the novel she no longer cares what she looks like. 'Women go phut quite suddenly,' (p. 137) Mr Mackenzie observes when he sees how untidy Julia has become. Yet it was his

abandonment of Julia which led to her dissolution. She felt 'smashed up' (p. 37) by him and indeed when she was no longer useful to him, when physical attraction had turned to repulsion because of her emotional demands, Mr Mackenzie was compelled by cowardice to discard her.

The scenes of clothes purchasing are rituals in which the Rhys heroine conjures up a fantasy: 'This is the beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I'll go to all the lovely places I've ever dreamed of' (*Voyage in the Dark*, p. 25)). The saleswoman, generally a neutral or vaguely sympathetic figure, participates in the crucial process of putting together an image. The heroine trembles with anxiety because the person she envisions becoming by wearing these new clothes is not real. Out of pleasure comes disillusionment and terror at having spent her money on clothes which will not after all provide decorative armour to do battle for lovers.

Money, the link between a successful image and the acquisition of a lover, figures largely in Rhys's novels. Rhys details the cost of her heroines' hotel rooms, clothes and food, the amounts of money these women receive from lovers. Yet her novels are hardly realistic in the Dreiser tradition; we know little about the social background or even the appearance of many of the male characters, and Rhys gives barely a hint of the social and political currents of the twenties and thirties. What we do know is that money is always intimately connected with the power men and at times women wield over the Rhys heroine. In that she rarely calculates how to make or save money, the Rhys heroine rejects this power for herself. Mr Mackenzie cannot bring himself to give Julia a lump sum because he knows she will spend it all at once.

Although several heroines drift towards prostitution, money and sex are more than just commodities to be exchanged. After Anna makes love with Walter Jeffries, she allows him to place money in her bag. 'I meant to say, «What are you doing?» But when I went up to him instead of saying, «Don't do that,» I said «All right, if you like — anything you like, any way you like.» And I kissed his hand' (*Voyage in the Dark*, pp. 33-4). At that moment Anna not only accepts Walter as her master, but ensures that she will be victimised. 'I felt miserable suddenly and utterly lost. «Why did I do that?» I thought' (p. 34). Why? Because Anna, the young, helpless virgin, regards this wealthy, older, patronising man as a father. He gives her money, enjoys her innocence; she becomes his little girl, admired and protected for a time. This father-daughter relationship is evident from the beginning of *Voyage in the Dark*, when Walter helps Anna during her illness. He takes over her life: he calls his doctor, brings food and medicine and manages Anna's cranky landlady. Even the diction

and syntax of Anna's thoughts about her affair with Walter have the fragmentation and simplicity of a child's mind:

But in the daytime it was all right. And when you'd had a drink you knew it was the best way to live in the world because anything might happen.... Dressing to go and meet him and coming out of the restaurant and the lights in the streets and getting into a taxi and when he kissed you in the taxi going there. (p. 64)

Marya and Julia engage in similar if much more subtle father-daughter relationships, the father at times a cold, punishing Nobadaddy. Since the Rhys heroine is really searching for fatherly affection in the guise of sex, the sexual act is always described in flat, curiously sexless terms: 'When he touched her she felt warm and secure, then weak and so desolate the tears came into her eyes' (*Quartet*, p. 57). For Marya, Heidler is the supreme Daddy; large, sturdy and somewhat obtuse, he distributes money and attention in an unpredictable way so that Marya feels a 'perpetual aching longing.... And the fear ... that the little she had would be taken away from her' (pp. 95-6). More than almost any male character in Rhys's novels, he personifies the power of the patriarchy:

Heidler sat in a big armchair near the stove opening his letters and when the last letter was read he unfolded the *Matin* and asked for more coffee. Marya always brought the cup and sugar for he was very majestic and paternal in a dressing-gown and it seemed natural that she should wait on him. He would thank her without looking at her and disappear behind the newspaper. He had abruptly become the remote impersonal male of the establishment. (p. 47)

Not only does Heidler claim the largest chair but he engages in the most important activities, those which connect him with the powerful establishment on the outside; he receives and reads letters and the newspaper.

In each of these three novels the heroine is defeated by a pair of oppressors who are, in a sense, surrogate parental figures; the one loves and seduces, the other punishes. The two together overwhelm the Rhys heroine who will always be the powerless child outside the adult realm. Yet there is another way to look at these relationships. Put in very crude terms, the triangle of Heidler, Lois Heidler and Marya is that of customer, pimp and prostitute. The prostitute is the social victim but never the moral one; it is her customer who debases himself and his sexuality by buying her body and affection. And the pimp, the parasite who feeds off of the sexual and material needs of the customer and prostitute is the real villain. The ultimate pimp in the Rhys universe is a woman like Lois who out of self interest joins forces with the patriarchy.

By procuring Marya for Heidler, Lois preserves her place in a marriage which is socially and economically necessary for her survival. When Marya tries to leave the Heidlrs, Lois thinks 'Oh, no, my girl, you won't go away. You'll stay here where I can keep an eye on you. It won't last long.... It can't last long. I've always let him alone and given him what he wanted and it's never failed me' (p. 64).

The Rhys heroine emerges from these relationships comparatively guiltless, a position which she makes use of. When at the end of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Julia abruptly asks Mr Mackenzie for a hundred francs, she destroys any romantic illusions he had about himself on seeing her again; she reminds him that not only was their past relationship based on money, but that he of course was the crass one. She was merely trying to survive.

At times one feels that the Rhys heroine enjoys her position not only because it confers moral superiority but because she longs to be possessed. Gifts of money may be humiliating, but they are also comforting because they establish without a doubt the relationship between possessor and possessed. Paradoxically it is easier for Julia to take risks, to feel free when in the power of a lover.

By touching bottom, economically, socially, and emotionally, the Rhys heroine joins a class of social misfits, those who haven't even the veneer of respectability, the protection of money and class, or the assumed racial or sexual superiority. Rhys clearly sympathises with these underdogs, for her heroines feel most comfortable, most at ease in their presence. Marya lives quite contentedly with her husband Zelli, who turns out to be a thief. When the two of them have money, they spend it extravagantly; when they are broke, they live on cheap white wine. The middle class Heidlrs are repulsed by Zelli's reckless approach to life, his underworld connections, his imprisonment.

Anne remembers how, when she lived in the West Indies, she wished to be black, the exploited race, a vibrant subculture on an island ruled by European whites. For Anna, the blacks represent warmth, exoticism and a kind of innocence. Like Zelli they live in the present, heedless of middle class virtues of thrift and order. Yet Rhys is too intelligent a writer to define the black culture or her heroines as simple children or primitives. They are children only in their powerlessness and their rejection of what they see as a hypocritical white middle class code.

Early on in *Quartet*, Rhys connects Marya's condition as a victim with the seedy side of Parisian life through a juxtaposition of short descriptions of Montparnasse backstreets with observations on the English middle class. Marya visits Miss De Solla, an expatriate herself and somewhat of

an outsider since she is a lone woman, an artist and a Jew. Miss De Solla observes that the English 'touch life with gloves on' (p. 9). The English in Rhys's world represent everything antithetical to sensuality and joy. Miss De Solla continues to talk about the English, but Marya's attention is drawn to music coming from the street and her mind wanders: 'Listening to it gave Marya the same feeling of melancholy pleasure as she had when walking along the shadowed side of one of those narrow streets full of shabby parfumeries, second-hand bookstalls, cheap hat shops, bars frequented by gaily painted ladies and loud voiced men, midwives premises' (p. 9). This is a woman-centred world, the words 'narrow' and 'shadowed' suggesting its limited and marginal nature. Even the description which follows of a homosexual cafe which Marya discovered on one of these streets partakes of the same atmosphere. 'There was no *patronne* but the *patron* was beautifully made up. Crimson was where crimson should be, and rose colour where rose-colour.... The room was full of men in caps who bawled intimacies at each other' (p. 9). In these homosexual and female subcultures, there is none of the fear of intimacy and sexuality, and the consequent voyeurism which Marya encounters in the English. Later on in the same chapter, when Marya meets Lois Heidler for the first time, the contrast between the two cultures becomes even clearer. Lois's comment, 'H.J. and I have quite made up our minds that eating is the greatest pleasure in life' (p. 12), like her later categorisations of people and her art, is that of a dilettante and a voyeur. By reducing people to types, and regulating and even idealising sensuality, Lois Heidler does indeed 'touch life with gloves on'.

In *Voyage in the Dark*, set entirely in London, Anna's memories of her West Indian childhood become the attractive netherworld. In this novel, written after *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Rhys had more distance in terms of time from her heroine, a younger, less battered version of Julia or Marya. Nostalgia for the West Indies and a lost childhood which would have figured largely in Rhys's memories of her first years in England permeate the novel.

Voyage in the Dark begins with a comparison of the West Indies and England, those two realities which can never be reconciled for Anna. She recalls the West Indies in sensual terms. These passages, like those in *Quartet* about Montparnasse backstreets, detail the tremendous variety of life: the differences in smells, the catalogue of spices and sweets sold in the market, the extremes of colour in the sea and sky. Whereas in England everything looks the same: 'You were perpetually moving to another place which was perpetually the same' (p. 8). Anna's memory of the West Indies is more vivid than her vision of London although both

are written of in the past and that of the West Indies in the more distant past. England and her life there is like a hazy dream.

Yet even in the West Indies, her home, Anna is in limbo between the politically dominant white middle class society which she rejects, and the black culture which is so attractive but ultimately closed to her. To be black is to be close to the warmth, the heart of life. The black women Anna remembers have grace, pride and magical powers; they are not the weak, insolent creatures Anna meets in England who seem so much at the mercy of men. Francine, Anna's black friend and the family servant, is probably the only sympathetic woman in the novel. She takes care of Anna when she is ill and when she menstruates for the first time: 'it was she who explained to me, so that it seemed quite all right and I thought it was all in the day's work like eating and drinking' (p. 59). But as the novel progresses, these positive memories become infected with the fear of entrapment and a sense of exile. Anna remembers the lists of slaves they found in the old mansion and in particular, the name of a female slave, age 18, Anna's age. Later on Anna thinks of Francine working in the stifling kitchen. 'But I know that of course she disliked me too because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white' (p. 62). At the end of the novel, Anna's dream while she is having an abortion is a kind of summing up of these anxieties. She is watching a masquerade in which blacks, hidden behind pink masks and white powder taunt their oppressors. At the end of the dream, Anna rides from the streets to the savannah and finally to 'a place where nobody is a place full of stones where nobody is' (p. 158). The colourful images have become shadows. This, Anna's last memory about the West Indies in the novel, is profoundly different in its tone from the first. The conflict between whites and blacks is ominous and Anna's place is very much outside both worlds. Hence the last words of the novel 'about starting all over again' (p. 159) in the context of an abortion signify more than just a pathetic hope and an ironic authorial commentary. In that Anna can no longer depend on her netherworld or her fatherly lover, and the two are jumbled up in this last dream, for emotional or material sustenance, the child killed within her is her childhood and innocence; she 'starts again' as an adult.

Rhys's usual austere style in which description is kept to a minimum and the reality outside the heroine's mind is a rapid counterpoint of conversation and action, changes when she describes the black culture of the West Indies or the back streets of Montparnasse. Passages are laden with detail; sentences trail with modifiers. The characters and the author herself, in a sense, allow themselves pleasure in these passages. Because

of her position in society the Rhys heroine has earned the close acquaintance and the delight of these streets, marketplaces, these lovely, lowly women. In *Quartet* and *Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, these passages seem like aberrations from the normal Rhys style; in *Voyage in the Dark*, these aberrations become more frequent and constitute an alternative reality for the heroine. In the two later novels, *Good Morning Midnight* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the contrast between the two styles, the two realities becomes the main focus.

NOTES

1. Jean Rhys, *Quartet* (Chatto & Windus, 1928; Penguin Books, 1973), p. 49. Further references to the Penguin edition are given after quotations in the text.
2. Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (Jonathan Cape, 1930; Penguin Books, 1971), p. 11. Further references to the Penguin edition are given after quotations in the text.
3. Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (Constable, 1934; Penguin Books, 1969), p. 12. Further references to the Penguin edition are given after quotations in the text.

Wilson Harris

INTERVIEW

Jane Wilkinson interviewed Wilson Harris in Turin on 29 October 1985.



The search for identity, for wholeness, together with the theme of the broken individual, seems to be central to Caribbean literature. How do you see this problem?

Well, as I tend to see it at this point in time, there is a kind of wholeness, but one can't structure that wholeness. One knows it's there and one moves into it ceaselessly, but all the time one moves with partial images. Now the partial image has within it a degree of bias but it also represents a part of something else, so that there is a kind of ceaseless *expedition* into

wholeness which has to do with the ways in which one consumes — metaphysically consumes — the bias in the partial image and releases that image as a part of something else which one may not be immediately aware of in that context — one may not be immediately aware of how the partial image links up with another partial image until the centre of being in an imaginative work breaks or moves and the illusory centrality of the partial image is enriched by creative paradox. So that I think in the Caribbean and in the South Americas, because of the residue of cultures and what has happened in the past, that kind of approach seems to be of significance. I mean there are two questions there. One is the question of wholeness. But that cannot be seized or structured. So we move ceaselessly into wholeness through partial images and there are two aspects to that movement. One is the way in which one consumes the bias within the partial image and the other is the ways in which the partial image is released as a part of something whole. And in releasing it as a part of something whole, one sees new links and connections with other parts which one may not have perceived before. So the ways in which an image alters its shape, its *quantitative* shape, and takes on a *qualitative* difference and dimension will affect the texture of the fiction, the texture of the images of the fictions.

Is your constant use of paradox, your juxtaposition of apparently contradictory images and epithets connected with this theme?

It is. It is connected with that theme.

The word 'tradition' figures prominently in your critical work, while your poetry, novels and short stories seem to be built on a blend of various traditions, Western, Amerindian, African, East Indian... What is tradition to you?

Well, tradition means many things of course, but one aspect I would seize on is the paradox of forces. For example — one could give many illustrations of this, but if I could give one, this comes quickly to mind — it has to do with my recent novel *Carnival*, in which there is a false shaman. The false shaman is the one who may commit a certain kind of violence. So the false shaman, to put it crudely, slices, cuts, is violent. The true shaman also slices, also cuts, but in slicing, in cutting, the true shaman is involved in a phenomenon of creativity. There is a slicing and a cutting involved in creation; that is, the sculptor who sculpts, the material that he sculpts he slices. The poet as well, in becoming involved in the disclosure of partial images and wholeness is doing a kind of slicing

within himself yet beyond himself because he is affected by his own work. And the distinction is that these two things resemble each other but they are obviously radically different so there is a paradox of forces in which you have two things that seem the same but are not the same. And in my judgement this is at the heart of tradition. I mean one can address other aspects of it but I think this is a very important aspect of tradition. It is dismissed by many critics who concentrate on solidity-for-the-sake-of-solidity and thus they do not see how an image swings around to show many faces. On one face is the kind of slicing that represents violence. On the other face one sees a slicing that has to do more with some evolutionary phenomenon which is akin to creativity. All this in fact is ingrained in creativity.

Your slicing image is unusual. One usually thinks of creativity in terms of building or of adding onto something...

How can one build in stone or wood except through complex displacement in the materials one uses? I think of creativity in terms of very profound changes that can occur in a form as that form alters its complex. For example, I was speaking of Dantesque allegory at the conference today¹ and I was saying that the watertight compartments, the absolutely sovereign compartments between the *inferno*, *purgatorio* and *paradiso* are in some degree altered to overlap and penetrate one another in subtle degrees. One is involved in an evolution of form and evolution seems to me the best word one could use. I don't mean by this Darwinist — certainly not Spencerian — evolution, but nevertheless I don't know of another word which would imply the kind of changes I have in mind. In *The Secret Ladder*, for example, you may remember the old man Poseidon, who seems to have his skin wrinkled like a kind of snake. He's a very very old man and his hair is white as the fleece of a lamb. So he has within himself what appears to be some kind of animal characteristic and a human characteristic. Now I regard that as a kind of metaphysical evolution because it indicates — it may indicate — some kind of change within the structure of values that affects that particular society and therefore it comes in this evolutionary form. In many of the great religions, for example, one is aware of the half animal, half bird in the human. Even the Christian annunciation comes with the dove, so you have the animal or bird. And you go back into ancient savage traditions and you see this as well. In ancient Greece as well. There is a kind of peculiar blend of forces that seems to me to indicate a change in society as if society is beginning to release itself from some conscription, from some

frame in which it resides, and then you get a play of different things. In fact as I am saying this I recall Quetzalcoatl, the ancient god of ancient America. *Quetzal* is the bird and *Coatl* is the snake and there you have again that kind of metaphysical evolution. I think that metaphysical evolution also has to do with the complex consumption of bias because a society cannot change unless it senses the ways in which it alters the rigidities and the cruelties that may have obsessed it at one period, or even the obsession with a certain kind of absolute security that may have framed it at a certain period. And when that alteration occurs it's akin to a kind of evolution because it draws its substance both from nature as well as from the human. Well, the human is in nature. When I say in nature I speak loosely to mean the animal. I am really only speaking of 'frames' of nature that masquerade as 'total' nature...

In the opening pages of Ascent to Omai there is a wonderful image of a face with the landscape blending into it or filtering through it. Is this also connected with what you were saying?

Yes. That is a part of it. You are speaking of the pork-knocker who is ascending and you get a curious infiltration of different colours or pigmentations almost as if there's a kind of cathedral complex... Curiously enough that could be explained I suppose on the ground of alchemy, you know, the different forces in alchemy, the *nigredo*, which is the darkness, the *albedo*, which is the whiteness, and the *cauda pavonis*, the colours of the peacock. Well, I believe all those manifestations have some kind of evolutionary impulse, some kind of change, because after all the human psyche is unfathomable. It needs to descend into itself to find itself ceaselessly beyond the frames by which it deceives itself as to the nature of the cosmos. It has its roots so deep that one can never be certain of the depth of those roots and things can come up which alter our vision, our whole way of sensing things, and we are released to bring together resources which we may otherwise not see at all. Things that we may have discarded and regarded as futile or as inferior, as one regards an animal creature as inferior, and other things that we may have regarded as inferior begin to play a part they become significant. And therefore they affect our entire vision of how a society should survive, the meaning of survival, and a lot of that is drawn from sources that one would have thrust aside as irrelevant or unimportant. The animal world I think one tends sometimes to think of in that way. You know, the ancient cave-painters, for example, when they painted their animals they were conscious of a profound dialogue with the animal, so the animal that they

had to consume was a kind of god. There was a *profound* dialogue with the animal. It wasn't just a mechanical thing of overpowering that creature. We tend to some extent to overlook elements that would seem to me to be vitally important. We need to draw them in again, to see them differently and to sense the enormity, the great potency of life that may reside in something that we may dismiss as irrelevant.

You mentioned alchemy. In your book Tradition, the Writer and Society, you say that 'we may be closer than we think to the Hermetic arts of Bruno and the alchemical imagination where the filter of the mind was as much part of the process of experiment as the material itself under scrutiny'. Direct or indirect references to alchemy are in fact recurrent in your work. Would you like to explain the importance of the 'alchemical imagination' in your writing?

Well, I can't remember the entire context in which that appears, but what I would say straight away is that the alchemical imagination functions in this way, in my judgement. You know the alchemists believed in what they call the *nigredo* phase, which meant the unknown land — they were entering the unknown land and therefore it was a kind of darkness. Now as they explored that, a kind of illumination came into being which they called the *albedo* phase or the dawn, dawning light, and then that moved on into the phase they called the *cauda pavonis*, the colours of the peacock. Now the thing is that the *cauda pavonis* phase can come back into the *nigredo* phase but the new *nigredo* phase is enriched and it moves again into the *albedo* phase and *that* is enriched and it moves on... So it's a continuous kind of cyclical thing which could be expanding, if you like, but every time it is as if the *nigredo* phase alters its shape and form as it moves back into the *albedo* phase. In other words the 'labels' of alchemy are a *threshold* into Being, into a *de-centred Being* through which we break the tyranny of one-sided existence, one-sided charisma or centrality.

This could also perhaps explain the constant recurrence of characters, names and places in your own fiction, as if you're continually...

Yes. I have extended that... One of the difficulties of these novels is that one is continually seeking an intellectual explanation for something which exists in an imaginative work and that always has its harassing side. But that explanation I would take up on a different level in terms of what I was saying at the conference today, in terms of the noose — 'the noose is a noose is *not* a noose' — you remember? I was really saying that

the history of the South Americas and the Guyanas is one of great uncertainty. And many expeditions have been lost and many cultures have disappeared and we don't know what really happened. We can say *this* may have happened or *that* may have happened. It applies to individuals as well. Expeditions have vanished. Individuals have vanished. We do not know exactly how the death or disappearance occurred. Therefore at the beginning of *Palace* you have this curious scene in which the dreamer descends into the world of his twin brother Donne and seems to see him as if he had been shot or hanged. We know also that he may have been drowned. Now these uncertainties can be built into the fiction at another level in which you speak of the second death. But each time you come to an end, the end of a phase, it means that you break that mould and you sort of rehearse the thing and see it differently and then you move again as if there's a sort of genesis of the imagination, a new start.

A constant process of rehearsals, not a finished spectacle?

Rehearsal anyway, an infinite rehearsal. So the last noose in which Donne hangs and is not killed or strangled means that that is a noose but it is *not* a noose. This *intuitive* transformation of a noose has haunted me for many years. Now I find some consolation in calling it the 'quantum' imagination. *A particle is a name* in quantum physics. In the novel, as I wrote it, the 'second death' ushered in a change of pattern, a break in the mould of the fiction, so to speak. A partial image carried on — to put it crudely — into the new phase, seemed the same, but had *qualitatively* altered its value to deepen, as it were, the ground of conscience, *the conscience in the creative act*. A noose is a noose is *not* a noose. That's what these 'rehearsals' do. They imply infinite *qualitative* distinctions in a shape or a pattern. The quantum imagination. So that is *another* way of approaching this matter of the circulation of forces which I spoke of before. You can see the relationship between the two. But the question all the time is to find some way to speak of it *outside* the fiction, to speak of it in purely intellectual terms. That's the difficulty all the time.

Like many Caribbean writers, you do not live in the Caribbean. You in fact left Guyana in 1959. To what extent has this uprooting influenced your vision?

You must remember that when I left Guyana in 1959 I was thirty-eight, so I had lived a pretty full life and had travelled extensively. I tend to feel that that movement out of Guyana was a necessary movement for a number of reasons which I won't go into. But it was a necessary

movement and almost in a sense it had to do with the breaking of a mould of which I've been speaking. So when one looks back on these things you can see different phases of your life as if you're living several lives. So that the moving out of Guyana was at the end of a kind of metaphorical life and the beginnings of another dimension of visionary existence. All of that, therefore, has affected my vision of the world outside it so that in a sense it means that one has not only a way of looking back into the past but a way of sensing some of the problems that exist in the modern world, of Europe or elsewhere. But one is seeing it with the kind of eye I have been disclosing, one is testing this whole ground of different phases and the breaking of moulds. The whole thing seems to have a kind of rightness because it seems to suggest that the implications that one has sensed in the Guyanas are implications that bear upon the world outside. And if one had not moved out, well then one would not have physically and mentally tested oneself in that way. The moving out seemed to be a necessary phase. And in fact it seems to endorse what I was saying before — the partial and the whole — that there is no single culture and no place that can be excluded from these considerations. The novels I have written since then have been set in different places but I think it helps to deepen and in a strange way to bring me into close contact with this kind of reality.

The journey into the interior, into the 'Heartland', is evidently a metaphor for a journey into the psychic interior of the individual, as well as being a journey into the psychological impulses and motives that generate historical events and into the conscious and unconscious attitudes of conquest. Do you see your work as belonging to a kind of Heart of Darkness tradition?

I would suggest that that kind of journey in some periods raises the matter I spoke of this morning: the impossible quest. For example, in *The Secret Ladder* there is this sensation that one has that Poseidon, the followers of Poseidon in the wake of Poseidon's death, would have pulled the whole world down; they would have destroyed everything. So that in the journey into the interior because there is that aspect of the impossible quest there is also the aspect of the paradox of forces I spoke of before. There is the whole question of how one relates to very frail things, to very subtle and frail things which become immensely important. In other words, when one thinks of all the lives that have been lost and eclipsed in previous journeys, when one thinks of the landscape that you may have noticed — say in *Palace* or in *Oudin* or elsewhere — all these peculiar elements come into play. For example, there is the journey that the boat

is making when it comes down the river. The way that the boatmen have to watch every ripple, every element in the river, just a tiny rock or pebble, everything begins to acquire meaning and significance. It means therefore that rather than discarding things or seeing them as merely accidental rubble, all these things begin to acquire significance, as if one has to judge the journey as a way of resuscitating or recovering some grasp of things which excludes nothing. Now I know that is impossible. I mean, no writer could achieve that entirely. But such an impossible quest bears upon inner space and inner time and therefore it bears essentially on the value of life, the value of survival, the value of the person, whatever may be the catastrophe that appears to overwhelm that expedition. At the heart of that catastrophe does not lie the darkness of Conrad, but an illumination, however frail that illumination is, however apparently insignificant that illumination is. It grows, it expands, it has profound value, and therefore one is overturning the heart of darkness. One is suggesting that there is a heart... of love, if you like, but the two seem close together at times because one appears to be lost at times, to be bewildered and to be overwhelmed. And yet within this lies this frail, apparently frail, still, small voice, that apparently frail impulse that is the heart of love, which may appear to resemble the heart of darkness because it is so frail that it seems to relinquish its capacity to heal. And yet it does not do that. It has a value that one senses more and more.

This is a complicated reply to your question. I wish I could put it in a simpler way. I mean, what I'm saying, fundamentally, is that the journey of which you speak is one which has an overwhelming aspect, as if everything could be destroyed. On the other hand, running close to that is something else which suggests that the journey is not a journey that is utterly and absolutely doomed. Because changes occur within the journey that allow us to see the whole journey differently from stage to stage. Those changes are not pinned to great solidities. They are pinned to frail things. Vigilance, for example, the eye of Vigilance, his is the eye that sees the frail things; he sees the web, the curious pentecostal web, things that are frail, that no one else sees: he sees what appears to be the strange spider that is climbing the cliff and that no one else appears to see, but it becomes a wheel which spins in the waterfall and lifts someone up. These frail things which one would otherwise overlook, give a density to the narrative but it's as if planted in the density there are various triggers that convert something into something else and therefore you get this — the journey therefore is a journey really which has the aspect of inner space and inner space (and inner time) is obviously very important because how else would one see these frailties? It means then that the

human person is imbued with great mystery even though he appears helpless and even though he may appear at times to be lost or bewildered. There is some profound therapeutic reality within the human person and some of this can only be gained when one senses the potency of inner space and inner time.

This brings us to your use of new dimensions of space and time and also character. The reader is constantly shifted from one dimension or layer to another, which in turn contains yet another. Does your exploration of new temporal and spatial dimensions have something to do with the particularities of West Indian history?

It has in the sense that our uncertainties about history, about things that have happened, are so profound. Not only in the West Indies and South America, but in Central America. There are ancient cities like the city of Teotihuacan. No one knows what happened. Even the name is a name which was given by the Aztecs. The Caribs, the disappearance of the Caribs in the West Indies and in South America remains an enigma. I know there is a people who still relates to the Caribs, it claims to have descended from the Caribs. The Caribs disappeared very suddenly. We don't know what happened. We have these uncertainties, and I'm saying that out of these uncertainties one could begin to create the kind of fiction that responds to those uncertainties. So I come back to what I said earlier. So you begin to create the first death, the second death, the third death, and each time you break the mould you rehearse the thing, you see embryonic elements. So those are the elements that are right at the core, the very seed of a certain kind of structure or possibility. You see those again in you and therefore you have a chance to take the consequences of history upon yourself, into yourself, and deal with them differently.

I was particularly struck, in reading Da Silva da Silva's Cultivated Wilderness, of your use of the visual arts and the way that Da Silva seems to be painting life as he lives it or living life as he paints it...

Yes, he lives life in his canvas, as if he lives it — if he's walking in the street, he's walking in his paintings.

I was wondering about the presence of visual art in your fiction. It seems to be very strong. Perhaps even more than music. I mean, the structure of your work could be seen also as musical, of course, but it seems to me to be more related to sculpture, architecture and, particularly, painting. Is that so?

Well, the musical thing has an importance which we could come to later, if you like. But as far as the painting thing goes, one of the pressures on me was that I believe that fiction has to reflect the blindness of a culture. In other words, the painting, in a sense. Let me put it this way: as one moves in the street, or wherever it is that one moves, one sees so much and so much one does not see. Now in Da Silva, those paintings that he had painted seven years before, he sees them differently. It's as if he becomes aware of the fact that there are things in the painting which he may not have perceived even when he painted the painting, and that reflects on his whole movement through whatever place happens to be the place in which he lives and moves, so that he has to somehow come into dialogue with that thing again. As if each painting is a world in which is secreted a lamp (or a series of lamps) one never recognises as a lamp until one 'touches' or reflects upon it in a new way and the *genie* springs forth... At different levels.

Now, for example, in *Da Silva da Silva* you may remember this curious proposition that is presented of a bird that flies from one point across the ocean or whatever and arrives at the other point. He is guided by the stars and the sun. So it does this without deviation. But we cannot do that. We have to make our way by navigation, by mathematics. But no bird is capable of mathematics. Mathematics therefore comes from some recognition in ourselves that we have lost something which the bird possesses and in losing that we enter the realm of art and science. We begin to explore, much more deeply and much more strangely, the world around ourselves which we create because we are constantly creating something which we need to return to and rediscover; we constantly need to revise our vision of the world around us, but the paradox is that out of that arises the greatest arts and sciences. So there is a paradox in recognizing our half blindness. It is as if we move into ourselves and discover another eye, another way of looking at the world, which questions our physical vision. It questions therefore all the facts which we put together and which may be very useful but which we need to look at again in another way. And it is as if something else grows within ourselves that responds to that crisis, that loss of animal instinct. Da Silva is doing this through his paintings. That's one aspect of this. He's also painting himself into the masks of our past regimes. He never paints himself as himself. He puts a mask on himself. It might be Magellan or it might be Cuffey, the slave rebel, or it might be someone else. So it's as if he secretes himself in a past age and senses something of the desolation of that past age, but senses also the pressures and the possibilities and the potentials. And then he's able to slip out of that with some kind of

capacity to relate to another age, if you like, in which he puts himself. So he's never caught within any one frame because he's aware all the time of how vulnerable he is and how half blind he is and how in a way partially crippled he is, because the things that the animal would do and the bird would do, which seem instantaneous and remarkably accurate, he cannot do, but on the other hand the things he begins to do in terms of his crippled and half blind condition are mysteriously beautiful, provided he does not at any stage become so complacent that he thinks that he has it all. And that is part of the impulse in the Da Silva thing.

What about the musical element?

In a brief introduction to *The Guyana Quartet* (1985) I refer to the Carib cannibal bone flute and how this validates the music imageries that run through the *Quartet* and *Palace of the Peacock* in particular. I was not aware of this curious validation when I wrote the *Quartet*, but years later research in which I was involved brought home to me an intuitive rapport with a transformed bone flute in which the cannibal morsel acts as a camouflage upon the 'metaphysical consumption of bias' of which I have already spoken in this interview. I go into some detail in respect of this in the new introduction.

Your first books were collections of poetry, published while you were still in Guyana. Although in more recent years you seem to have devoted most of your time to prose writing, your prose is itself 'poetic' and extracts or 'fragments' from your poetry have been included in some of your novels as 'evidence' brought by or about one of the characters, or as scorched remains of the protagonist. What is the relationship between poetry and prose in your work?

There are many mediating factors between 'poetry' and 'prose' which may push a writer into narrative fiction. One may need to assess these in close detail to sense strategies and necessities in the body of language that few critics, as far as I am aware, have unfolded.

My profound interest is in the validation of imaginative fiction through live fossils of creation or the creative imagination buried in the soil of place and time. Such validation shakes one's complacency for it means that proof of the truths of imaginative fiction may lie through opening ourselves to alien questions of spirit.

Certain figures seem to hold particular fascination for you: the pork-knocker, the land surveyor, the artist, the engineer. Then there are the Anancy figures, and the

victor/victim, judge/judged, hunter/hunted pairs. Or the figures from the past who reappear in the present in original and unexpected reincarnations. Or the figure of the scarecrow. Would you like to talk about some of them?

Well, the pork-knocker is really a destitute figure who eventually may have to live on scraps. So he beats the bottom of the barrel to get the last scraps of pork out. He takes his provisions in, but he may be reduced to virtually nothing. So he has to hunt and so on, and he has to conserve everything. Now that is one of the haunting things about the pork-knocker. Let us start with the pork-knocker in *Heartland*, Da Silva. Da Silva comes out of *Palace*, that's the Da Silva who survives. He's the one who comes in the river, who comes to Stevenson, and he's the one who's found dead, lodged dead in the rocks. Da Silva is a Portuguese and when he's lodged in the rocks one has some kind of implicit recognition of the great Portuguese navigators who came around the world. Now it's a curious thing, if you reflect on it, that some of those great Portuguese navigators were pork-knockers — they had to live on scraps, you see — so by relating the great Portuguese navigator to the pork-knocker one is once again seizing upon a figure who seems decrepit, hollow, lost, and really in a sense revisiting the story, the theme of the great explorer, the great navigator, on whom so many consequences and responsibilities lie. I don't think that the circumnavigation of the globe could simply be accepted as a technical feat. Responsibilities accrue which have to do with the whole scope and capacity of our civilization. Now we may tend to forget that and think of Magellan as simply a historical figure in the museum of history. What I'm saying is that the responsibilities which one has to sense in terms of those great moments may be recovered or seen again in another light through apparently despised figures like the pork-knocker. Because once again you come into some kind of regeneration in which you begin to sense that this whole navigation thing, the consequences that flow from that navigation, bear upon us all. And it is through the pork-knocker, through a medium like Da Silva in this instance, a Portuguese pork-knocker, that one could relate to these great gigantic figures and relate to them at a level in which we may be able to sense some kind of vision within those great navigators. Despite their lusts, their greed, there may have been some vision, some very subtle, frail vision running along in concert with the whole expedition which was intent on sacking places or claiming places or doing this or doing that. There may have been some vision of immense importance which we have lost because we tend to think of it only in strict log-book mechanical terms and we may come back to that through the destitute pork-knocker,

because Da Silva is the one who has all the stuff to speak of in terms of conscience, of how conscience gnaws at us, and the great coffin in which he lies at the end and everything that he says seems to throw a strange bridge from that world which would seem to be so derelict into another world of museum values and museum greatness.

It is in that way that the scarecrow too tends to function. For instance, the scarecrow in *The Far Journey of Oudin*. Oudin is a kind of scarecrow figure, but he is also the one on whom so many strange things rest. Oudin is the one who is employed by Ram to steal from Mohammed. When he returns to Mohammed's home he resembles the half brother or heir to the estate Mohammed and his brothers had murdered and Mohammed's wife is frightfully aware of this and tormented, as if the murdered half brother has returned. It is Oudin who is sent by Ram to steal and put a brand on Mohammed's cattle. The very Oudin overturns Ram's world. He turns against Ram in the end. He seems at first to be the servant of the evil money lender Ram, but there is a strange rehearsal going on in which Oudin rescues the illiterate Indian girl Beti and takes her away, and as he takes her away across the landscape it is as if he is retracing the steps which the previous people had taken when they murdered the heir. It's as if everything were re-enacting itself, re-playing itself, through him. So the whole burden of the thing falls upon a kind of scarecrow figure who seems decrepit and incapable of carrying that burden.

The point I am making is that unless one can see right into the heart of that decrepit figure one may never be able to recover the consequences of a certain kind of empire in which a certain covenant with people needs to be recapitulated through marginal agents or figures whose ambivalence deepens our awareness of the past. That's how the scarecrow works. The victim as well, at a certain level. I mean, I'm not making generalizations, but if you look at the specific ways in which the victim works you see that without some comprehension of the victim you would lose sight entirely of what that whole complex culture is doing, what it has done to us. In other words, within the complex culture there are values, however brutal the culture may appear. It possesses values. But those values may only be gleaned or glimpsed through figures that seem decrepit and lost, whether they be scarecrows or victims or pork-knockers, etc. There is a variety of ways in which this moves within the novel. Much of it has to do with the matter of rehearsal — some of it, anyway, and the example I would like to mention quickly is in *The Secret Ladder* where the Portuguese woman Catalena is about to be raped and it is at that moment that she has the sense of a great overpowering figure who is about to save her life. At that

moment, when she looks up to see what figure it is, she sees the face of two of her enemies who have run from the river to bring news to their companions that they have no time to do this horrible thing because they believe the police are after them (they believe that they have killed a man, although they hadn't actually killed him), so they run in and that is how she is saved. So you have running together the terrifying ordeal of this woman and the vision that she has of a great presence about to save her, but then what appear are the masks of her enemies. So the two things run closely together: two forces again — we spoke of the paradox of forces — but the woman who is on the ground and who is reduced, who appears to be on the edge of the pit, it is through her that this enormous kind of intimation occurs. So that although I wouldn't call her a scarecrow figure she's not far removed from it, and she escapes.

The women in your novels play an important role and they often bear symbolic names: Maria, Petra, Magda...

All the women play very important roles. For example, in the Oudin case, without the illiterate girl Beti, it is possible that Oudin would have collapsed. At some level he needed her profoundly, he was sustained by her. I think this bears on the question of what kind of quest Oudin was intent on. Oudin may have at one time seen his quest as simply the acquisition of material property on behalf of the man who had employed him as a robber and so on. But later on he came to see his quest as having to do not only with the woman herself but with the child which she was to carry, in other words, through the woman, the future that lies ahead of him. Whatever may be his visions, whatever may be his possibilities or capacities, there must be a future and the woman is an essential response to the past and the future, so that some of his possibilities and powers have to be understood in that complex and this is not easy because there is a tendency to abuse women in that society: women were abused, they were illiterate, it was felt that there was no sense in educating them, and yet it is through someone like that that Oudin comes into his treasure, his most profound sensation of the value of life.

The Mariella woman in *Palace* is a woman who undergoes various metamorphoses that correspond to various rehearsals and the various modes of dying that we discussed before. There is Mariella the abused woman; there is the ancient Arawak woman who is related to Mariella, almost a metamorphosis of Mariella; there's the Mariella in the rapids who becomes the formidable mistress of events that remind them of the long journey they have made from Northern into Southern America; and

then there's the Mariella at the end, the kind of strange candle-like naked woman with the child. All these metamorphoses are of immense importance because they bear upon the ways in which that entire expedition will move into the future, the metaphysical consumption of bias. It's as if then their whole vision of life changes and in changing they begin to sense not only the importance of the women but the importance of their own humanity, because their own humanity is connected to the women and to the future and to the past, and unless they understand that they will destroy themselves. And the same thing applies at a certain level to many of the animal creatures who are hunted — in many of those societies the woman was hunted and the animal was hunted. So it's also a vision of nature and the resources of nature and the way nature sustains us in all sorts of ways, not only food but sex and not only sex but the sacramental values that reside in food and sex. All these things that come into shape and form and that could not happen unless the mould is broken at various times. So Mariella appears to be the same yet *not* the same at different moments when the mould is broken.

Magda, in *The Whole Armour*, is a terrifying woman. You see how she changes. She is the terrifying mother who saves Cristo and actually forces Cristo to put on the dead man's garments so that the dead man mauled by the tiger will appear to the police as Cristo. But then in the end the terrible Magda is depleted and the weak or apparently weak Sharon with whom Cristo has an affair is the one who'll sustain him. So you have the past and the future, the way the whole thing forms, turns around, and you can see into the heart of a kind of substance which one does not fully understand, which one abuses. So the women all the way through have that value of inimitable substance. In *Da Silva da Silva*, you may remember the woman who aborts her child but then relates this to the rib, Adam's rib, as much as to say that there is a price for fertility and sometimes that price has to be paid and Adam may have paid it in some obscure way that we know nothing about when the rib was plucked. This is a different way of looking at Adam, I grant. So she too has plucked a foetal rib out of her side, but in doing so espouses a sacramental value and becomes committed to the process of life. She becomes a social worker who cares for and tends neglected children... In other words you get this sense of fertility, of an aspect of terrifying fertility, and the fact that a price has to be paid in losses and gains. The abortion is not a mechanical thing, you can almost relate it to a kind of genesis fate or reality: why did God pluck the rib from Adam's side? We say it was done to create a companion, but it may have signified some test, some fertility test or ritual or something which we have forgotten. And unless we accept

some measure of blindness to all these connections we do not understand ourselves nor the miracle of regenerative psyche, regenerative life of the body of humanity in which fate and freedom move towards *the genius of love*, the mind and heart of *love*, the mind and heart of care which I sought to approach within an *evolution* of Dantesque tradition in my latest novel *Carnival*.

NOTE

1. Wilson Harris gave a talk on 'Comedy and Modern Allegory: A Personal View of the Revival of Dantesque Scenes in Modern Fiction' at the VIIIth Annual Conference of A.I.A. (Associazione Italiana di Anglistica) at the University of Turin on 29 October 1985.

STEPHEN SLEMON

Revisioning Allegory: Wilson Harris's *Carnival*

In each of his eighteen works of fiction published over the past quarter century, Wilson Harris has focused on the question of how to effect 'genuine change'¹ within history's 'phenomenal legacy' of monumental, seemingly totalising tradition and the conceptual biases it carries, and, in consequence, his novels tend to return to the same closely delimited ground of thematic concern and stylistic voice. Motifs, images, characters, and plot patterns recur throughout his *oeuvre*, giving rise to the perception that Harris's later work continues to draw from the 'over-reaching vision'² of his first novel *Palace of the Peacock*, re-examining its

implications for social change and for the performance, the grounding, of fiction itself. But as Harris has noted, 'one novel may pick up something in the fabric of a previous work and rehearse its implications anew, revise, revision itself'.³ and in this process of 'revisioning' Harris seizes on subtle *differences* in apparently similar fictional constructs, reaching always for a mode of writing 'that seeks through complex rehearsal to consume its own biases'.⁴ As Gregory Shaw notes, the 'cycle' of Harris's novels is more accurately viewed as 'progressive or incremental': 'in dialectical terms, each succeeding stage may be said to cancel the revelations of its predecessors, but it also preserves them and raises them to a higher level.'⁵ In this way, Harris's novels can be seen to be engaging with a tradition of the author's own making, the apparent unity of his fictional output standing as a trope for that seemingly monumental inheritance of history through which Harris seeks gateways into imaginative release, and his complex process of fictional 'rehearsal' representing a means by which contemporary post-colonial society can revise and transform received forms of perception into new and liberating 'codes of recognition'.⁶

Harris's most recent novel, *Carnival*, continues this dialectical process of 'infinite rehearsal',⁷ yet it does so in a way that has important consequences for how we read his fictional enterprise in relation to the problem of tradition. For *Carnival* is a full-blown allegory, modelled directly on Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and thus appearing to demand a reading position that seeks a *tertium quid* between the 'presented text' and the 'old, authoritative text' of Dante's canonical allegory.⁸ For the first time in Harris's work, the 'absolutely sovereign theatre' of tradition is thematised as an external text, one that threatens to subvert the autonomy of the novel by annihilating difference within allegorical correspondence. And for the first time, Harris employs overtly a mode of representation and a structure that, as a canonical form, has been invested in closure, in extending rather than revising totalising traditions, in furthering doctrinal and institutional purchase in social formations, and in constructing unified subjects whose linear journeys through geographies of difference promulgate a politics of appropriation and the construction of the imperial self. In other words, Harris, by raising frames of close similarity between *Carnival* and what he calls 'Dantesque allegory',⁹ risks locating his text in 'dynastic relation',¹⁰ to the Dantean 'pretext'¹¹ and the cognitive codes it carries. He risks fictional dependency, misreading, and implication in the unalterability of absolute forms. And yet this risk enables Harris to project the encounter with tradition not only into the thematic dimension of his fiction but also into its narrative form and

mode of representation, and thus the process of reading his novel becomes synonymous with a process of re-reading tradition. In this way, the allegorical dimension of *Carnival* becomes itself a gateway into the apparently fixed frames of the 'phenomenal legacy', a mode of 'representing' traditional codes under the transformative gaze of the actuating imagination.

Harris has written recently of 'a revival of Dantesque allegory', by which he means a mode of representation that settles on the capacity of 'living interior guides arising from the collective unconscious' to act as agents of 'genuine change'. Such interior guides draw the writer inevitably 'backwards and forwards to other imaginations he may have ignored or misunderstood', and in doing so they initiate 'a deep-seated, mutual, cross-cultural dialogue between imaginations'.¹⁴ Such a process, he feels, takes place when Virgil guides Dante through the Inferno and Paradiso, but 'the model universe or stage Dante inhabited has become a misconception of the cosmos across many centuries. All absolute model or stage is partial and needs therefore to be perceived in radical finitude if it is to confess its partiality.'¹³ In other words, the once-enabling tradition of allegory,¹⁴ which Dante exercised 'as the ruling pattern of the word',¹⁵ becomes 'value turned into bias, becomes catastrophic', a 'large scale, absolutely sovereign theatre or fixed abode'¹⁶ that conceals its partial nature and insists upon both a totalising similarity in metaphorical identification (a this *for* that kind of representation), and a rigidly demarcated hierarchy of absolute value — Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso, for example, remaining impervious, separable, and autonomous. 'Dantesque allegory' is thus emblematic of Harris's reading of tradition as a whole: ostensibly calcified and absolute, but containing within it the germ of imaginative release into cross-cultural dialogue through the agency of 'interior guides'.

Carnival may be the first of Harris's novels to engage with allegory so directly, but in retrospect we can see that Harris's interest in allegorical representation, and specifically in Dante, has been steadily growing in his work. Harris's first overt reference to Dante comes in his epigraph to *Heartland*. The concentric circles in the 'Factory of the Gilded Man' in *Ascent to Omai* invert the structure of Dante's Mount Purgatory, Harris's ninth outer circle of the Madonna corresponding to Dante's tenth inner circle of Earthly Paradise where the poet meets Beatrice, both women being figures of grace. In *Companions of the Day and Night*, the figure José functions as an interior guide of the second order (what Harris calls an 'inferior guide'), his limitations in perspective proving necessary to Idiot Nameless's process of illumination and his crossing of a threshold. In

Genesis of the Clowns, Harris writes of a 'divine comedy of the elements', and the title of *The Angel at the Gate* conjures the image of the angel at the gate of purgatory in Dante's *Purgatorio*, Canto IX. This is by no means a complete catalogue of Dantean elements in Harris's fiction, but it does show some of the ways that Dante enters into Harris's writing as a guide figure, and it does suggest a growing realisation of the importance of *The Divine Comedy* to Harris's imaginative vision.

This interest in Dante has, in Harris's earlier works, been apparent primarily in the thematic level, but, as Hena Maes-Jelinek points out, Harris's use of allegorical technique as a mode of representation goes back to his first novel, *Palace of the Peacock*.¹⁷ Here the crew members of the expedition are 'living embodiments' of 'the contrary states and motives' inherent in both the protagonist Donne and Guyanese society as a whole, and Harris portrays them in such a way that each 'occupies the foreground by turn'¹⁸ as the expedition proceeds up the river. Here Harris employs an allegorical pattern or structure formally reminiscent of *Everyman* or *Pilgrim's Progress*; and a similar kind of process occurs in *Heartland* and *Genesis of the Clowns*. As a traditional device, this use of personification allegory along a linear journey to some absolute goal posits progress as sequential and knowledge as entirely recuperable. In Harris's fiction, however, fragmented aspects of being enter into the text not through the metaphorical transfer of abstract elements into fictional agents, but through a process of cultural fragmentation characteristic of West Indian history and the colonial encounter. History produces Harris's archetypes; and in this way, his allegorical approach lies closer to Dante's typology than it does to Bunyan's reification of moral qualities.¹⁹ Even in his earlier writing, then, Harris's allegorical technique involves the injection of radical difference into the frame of the traditional spiritual allegory.²⁰ But it is not until he writes *Carnival* that Harris's tendency toward articulating post-colonial cultural fragmentation and difference in allegorical modes of representation combines with an overt thematisation of Dantean elements, and when the two strands combine, Harris produces what can only be described as a new departure in allegorical writing.

As Hena Maes-Jelinek notes, 'a basic feature of Harris's fiction has always been the transformation in both content and form of conventionalized or static forms of being and of narrative'.²¹ In *Carnival*, Harris foregrounds the allegorical journey as conventionalised narrative and combines it with the familiar myth of the sacrificial king, as described in J.G. Frazer, Jessie Weston, and others. Both patterns inscribe processes of transformation and renewal, but the apparent universalism of each of

them masks their centrality to the metaphysical structure of the imperial centre and their role in energising the colonial enterprise. They have become sovereign forms of tradition, ruling patterns of narrative whose 'false clarities' (p. 90) hypnotise the creative imagination; and the action of *Carnival* involves a long and complex process by which these patterns can be recuperated for the initiation of genuine change in our inherited codes of recognition, our received ways of imagining the world.

There is an important parallel at work in this process: the equation of potentially enabling narratives, now become absolutes, 'misconception(s) of cosmos', with the way in which history is perceived in a post-colonial West Indian culture. For in colonised societies, prevailing codes of recognition can themselves be products of colonialism, subject peoples conceptualising history as either 'the few privileged monuments'²² of achievement (and thus a prerogative of the coloniser) or as a vacancy or absence, something that happened somewhere else, leaving a condition of 'historylessness', of 'no visible history',²³ in the post-colonial world. Thus the thematic action of *Carnival* entails a journey back, a journey that is at once into narrative pattern and its transformational possibilities, and into the colonial world of Guyanese history — an Inferno (p. 21) of catastrophic domination and the exercise of absolute will, and a metonymy of, or gateway into, the 'tormented colonial age' (p. 36) of the twentieth century.

Jonathan Weyl, the narrator of *Carnival*, is led back into the colonial world of British Guiana in the 1920s by the 'interior guide' figure of Everyman Masters, who has recently died for the second time, slain by a character called Jane Fisher, herself a recapitulation of an earlier Jane Fisher who stabbed Masters, in the mask of plantation overseer, in the colonial New Forest setting. The process of memory, of imaginative recapitulation, begins on the Atlantic foreshore of the Guyanese coastland, where Masters, wearing the mask of the 'boy-king' (p. 20), is threatened by 'Memory's male persona' (p. 24), a potential rapist figure. In simple form, this is an allegorical representation of the colonial encounter itself. Masters representing the colonised and Memory the coloniser, the basic trope being that of the 'rape' entailed in the colonial encounter. But Harris's technique in this episode, and throughout the novel, is to complexify the basic narrative units of his narrative and to undermine any specific parallel between allegorical character and allegorical meaning.

Again in simple form, there are in essence two ways Harris goes about this. The first is to contextualise the narrative unit itself within the interstices of New World-Old World mythology. The mudflat setting of this

allegorical episode is portrayed as both 'an Orinoco-esque' and 'Dantesque gateway' (p. 18), leading towards the 'Old World' concepts of Genesis (Adam formed out of clay, and hence the Pygmalion legend — life being formed out of marble) and the 'New World' Arawak legend of the creation of a race out of a tree planted on the foreshore. The two share a basic similarity, but between them falls the intervention of history, specifically the search for El Dorado and the wholesale erasure of cultures belonging to ancient America. In other words, on the potentially sterile mudflats, a point of intersection between Old and New Worlds, and the setting for the allegorical representation of the 'rape' of one culture by another, Harris posits an allegorical identification between Masters and 'the race of mudheads', forebears of Masters who appeared in post-Columbian times 'to compensate the inexplicable demise of El Dorado' (p. 18).²⁴ The inherited concept of history is shown to be a gateway into new ways of seeing the past.

The second technique Harris uses to complexify his allegorical pattern is to thematise the implications of the surplus of signification that overflows the initial allegorical episode. Having shown that 'multiple perspectives' (p. 36) inhere in what at first seems to be a simple allegorical encounter, Harris seizes on an aspect of the colonial encounter in relation to this theme of sacrificial kingship and gives it bodily presence: the child Doubting Thomas, who represents the narrator's own uncertainty over the origins of kingship (p. 20). Doubting Thomas wears 'new world/old world masks ... fraught with ambiguity' (p. 21), and he too becomes an 'indispensible guide thought the Inferno of history' (p. 21). Thomas goes on to collide with a 'marble' market woman carrying a basket of eggs (the Pygmalion myth again), this scene allegorising in another form the damage implicit in colonialism's collision of cultures. And this episode in turn leads Thomas to an encounter with another character, Flatfoot Johnny, who partly resembles Masters in the mask of Carnival king. Meanwhile, Masters flees the mudflats, running inland towards his mother, who is *another* allegorical representation of Memory, this time its female persona. In seeing *through* the mother's glass side into the humiliation of illegitimacy and miscegenation, Masters leads Weyl to perceive another allegorical representation, it too averted, of a received way of seeing the colonial encounter: the abortion of a culture.

'I have personified parallel existences ... in this spiritual biography', Weyl writes, and this technique extends throughout the entire novel. Whereas *Carnival* thematically follows a linear, sequential pattern of exposition, with Masters leading Weyl through a recapitulation of his life (his school years, his discovery of his real parents, his finding of his future

wife, his departure for the New World metropolis of London), on the allegorical level, each episode is complexified within itself and made parallel to at least one other allegorical representation of the same, or a similar, historical event. This duplication of allegorical reference prevents any single character or episode from laying sole claim to the 'absolute original' (p. 25) of historical meaning, so that every allegorical frame is partial, mediated by another set of allegorical signifiers that points to the same signifieds. For example, two episodes allegorise colonial conquest and the neo-colonial drive to better the coloniser at his own game, to wear the 'imperial mask' (p. 69): Master's schoolyard footrace with Meriman, and his highjump contest against the Venezuelan student, 'Philip of Spain'. And two dancer figures, both named Alice, mediate 'the realm of oblivion or absolute limbo [read post-colonial 'historylessness'] and the realm of Carnival evolution' (p. 41). Both of these examples complement Harris's handling of language throughout the novel, which is to build what seems to be oppositional, contradictory binaries into a great many of his phrases (i.e., 'the labyrinth of innocence and guilt', 'half oasis, half desert', 'Memory false and true', 'curved face and curved facelessness, Ambition's hero, Ambition's anti-hero'). The point Harris is making is that 'all images are partial but may masquerade for an age as absolute or sovereign' (p. 48). Seen as absolutes, such images blind us to 'a potential that has always been there for mutual rebirth' (p. 49), and Harris's aim in this work is to break them down. By employing an allegorical technique of 'partial figuration' (p. 46), then, Harris sets apparently similar frames of reference in juxtaposition to one another: 'climates of passion and emotion that reflect each other, *not* to overwhelm each other but to «redeem» ... the fragmentation of cultures' (p. 49).

This pattern of reflection, of apparent resemblance, is central to the political message the novel conveys. Harris believes that succeeding historical periods can become trapped in inherited codes of recognition that perpetuate themselves in treadmill fashion across 'times of succession' (p. 170), hypnotising people into blind acceptance of a received conceptual framework. In the post-colonial world, this problem can take the form of 'an addiction to imperium and its trappings', a dilemma Harris sees as being 'at the heart of cross-cultural tradition that faces humanity'.²⁵ Harris calls this pattern of historical succession 'the law of the frame' (p. 113), giving as a specific example of it the way in which the absolute moral code of New Forest law condemns to death an Amerindian man who, in accordance with his own laws, has committed an act of matricide. The narrator's father, Martin Weyl, argues against this

judgement because he sees that it mistakes genuine change for the succession of one moribund, charismatic regime by another. His failure to initiate this genuine change destroys him, but his son, next in succession to himself, and guided through an 'infinite rehearsal' of personal and social history by a figure who inherits the ruling pattern or sovereign form of divine kingship, is able, at least in fiction, to bring this change about. On the larger canvas of *Carnival*'s thematic level, then, remembered past and imagined present are set into dialectic interaction with one another, the succeeding stage reversing the cognitive code of its predecessor and yet validating it as an object of contemplation which can trigger the imagination toward 'the seed of archaic revolution' (p. 121).

But perhaps the most startling aspect of *Carnival* is that this dialectical process begins at the level of the separate allegorical episodes and becomes the structuring principle of the work. In this way, Masters' encounter with Memory's male persona, and then Memory's female persona, is paradigmatic of the relations that obtain throughout the novel between characters, events, and locations, and even within the individual characters themselves as they proceed through time. Masters' encounter with Memory's female persona, the glass mother, allows him a vision of himself as 'foetal Carnival child' (p. 29), a figure which will be realised in another succession at the end of the novel in the figure of a girl child, produced by Carnival evolution and emblematic of 'a new century of the mind' (p. 171). But Masters could not have achieved this vision had he not fled from the terrifying figure of Memory's male persona, for revolution requires 'a complex relation to the tyrant-psyche one overcomes, a complex apprehension of the tyrant's blood as native to oneself and to the wounds of transfigurative inner/outer being, transfigurative architectures of the Carnival body of space' (p. 71). Throughout the novel, this basic dialectical pattern recurs, the female characters, generally, acting as figures of 'involuntary divinity' (p. 9) and, by violence, by art, or by grace, mediating the passage of male figures — heirs to absolute sovereign codes but potentially agents of sacrificial kingship and revolutionary consciousness — across seemingly fixed and absolute frames. Each passage bears certain thematic similarity with another, and may sometimes seem to be seamlessly contiguous with its predecessor (i.e. the novel's primary guide figure is portrayed as Everyman Masters the First, the Second, and so on, until he is transfigured into 'Lazarus'). But the dialectical interplay between each allegorical episode works to foreground the 'radical' difference (p. 29) between them, each unit modifying the revelations of its predecessor, confirming its allegorical significance while at the same time exposing its provisional nature and bias.

This dialectical interplay extends to the novel itself in relation to the tradition of 'Dantean allegory' it evokes, the process standing for that which Harris sees as potentially characteristic of our relation to tradition as a whole. The mode of narration of *Carnival*, its structure, and its story are based directly on *The Divine Comedy*, the narrator and his guide encountering separate allegorical episodes in serial form, and then pausing after each one to comment on its allegorical significance. The fiction begins in the Inferno of Guyanese history, entails the purgatorial crossing of water from the New World to the Old, and resolves in an image of paradisaical *coniunctio* where Weyl and his wife Amaryllis find themselves in possession of the mysterious baby girl, and 'wasted lives' become 'redeemed in time' (p. 170). And yet in Harris's presentation 'there is no absolute Inferno, absolute Purgatorio, absolute Paradiso. All of these overlap and re-appear in each other to chasten one, undermine one's complacency...' ²⁶ These elements of Dante's metaphysical system, sovereign codes that have become 'barren imperatives that imprison us', are thus overturned through the act of recuperating allegorical writing, an act that Harris sees as constituting 'a genuine descent into tradition'. ²⁷ This act unblocks a dialogue between the present age, which sees allegory as dead, and the tradition of Dantean allegory as 'ruling pattern of the word'. And thus 'the hidden past affects the present even as it emerges through present discoveries as a new, unsuspected force' (p. 31).

And inasmuch as Dante's allegory reappears in Harris's, the dialectical relation between them suggests that Harris's fiction also provides a means of re-reading Dante's work. The principle here is that of 'reversible fiction' (p. 90), and Harris gives a direct example of this near the end of his novel. Just before the narrator and Amaryllis achieve their paradisaical vision of the world, one of Masters' school teachers reappears in the text. This character, named Delph, seems to combine qualities belonging to both the female Delphic oracle (image of *omphalos*, centre of the world) and 'Antipodean man' (p. 162). Delph uses written words to initiate Masters, and hence Weyl, into a process of 'far viewing' (p. 163), by which Harris means a kind of seeing that transcends what we think of as 'natural' law, allowing the viewer access to perceptual phenomena that lie beyond his or her specific geographical site. From the kind of reading position Harris's dialectical allegory seems to encourage, it is possible to see this episode as a gloss on Dante's allegorical work, suggesting that moment at the end of *Inferno* when Virgil and Dante arrive at the dead centre of the earth, reverse their geographical axis by turning head to toe towards the antipodes (where Dante placed his Mount Purgatory), and then continue their journey in the same linear

direction, but ascending now rather than descending. If such a reading holds, then Harris's text seems to be saying that Dante's text itself, seen from the Carnival site of genuine revolutionary change, contains the capacity 'to reverse non-vision into vision, the blind ornament into the seeing vision, ... to put into reverse the obsolescence of institutions, the obsolescence of dead languages, that accumulate upon the sacred and clothe it with false clarities' (p. 90).

For if allegorical writing stands in Harris's scheme both as a mode of representation that contains the capacity for 'transformation' and as a trope for sovereign form, imperial tradition itself, 'the uncertain ground of tradition that bears upon post-colonial (or new literature) imaginations'²⁸ must contain 'many geographies in the theatre of psyche' (p. 107). It can 'turn sacred images around so that nothing is taken for granted',²⁹ or it can extend the absolute frames of allegorical tradition and its link with imperialism. It represents both 'greatest peril and greatest promise' (p. 171), a means of reinstating the canon and its codes of recognition, or a means of releasing post-colonial cultures from the grip of history through the dialectic of infinite rehearsal. And Harris asks,

Will modern allegory prove of importance in Third World cultures where inner confidence, inner authority, inner guide-lines are so essential — after the ravages of colonialism — in the growth of true freedoms...? Such a breakthrough requires us to accept the adversarial contexts in which cultures wrestle with each other but to descend as well into camouflages and masks as flexible frames within the mystery of genuine change.³⁰

NOTES

1. Wilson Harris, 'Adversarial Contexts and Creativity', *New Left Review*, 154 (Nov.-Dec., 1985), p. 128.
2. Michael Gilkes, *Wilson Harris and the Caribbean Novel* (London: Longman, 1975), pp. 23, 43.
3. Wilson Harris, 'Comedy and Modern Allegory: A Personal View' (paper presented at the Italian Association of English Studies conference, Turin, Italy, Oct. 1985), p. 1.
4. 'Adversarial Contexts and Creativity', op. cit., p. 127.
5. Gregory Shaw, 'Art and Dialectic in the Work of Wilson Harris', *New Left Review*, 153 (Sept.-Oct., 1985).
6. The term comes from Coral Ann Howells, 'Re-visions of Prairie Indian History in Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *My Lovely Enemy*', in *Re-visions of Canadian Literature*, ed. Shirley Chew (Leeds: Univ. of Leeds, Institute of Bibliography and Textual Criticism, 1984), p. 62.

7. Wilson Harris, *Carnival* (London: Faber, 1985), p. 161. All further references are to this edition and appear in the text.
8. See Stephen Barney, *Allegories of History, Allegories of Love* (Camden, Conn.: Archon, 1979), pp. 16-17.
9. Harris's most extensive discussions of allegory are in 'On the Beach', *Landfall*, 155 (Sept. 1985), pp. 335-41; 'Comedy and Modern Allegory', op. cit.; and 'Adversarial Contexts and Creativity', op. cit.
10. Edward Said, *Beginnings* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p. 10.
11. See Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1979).
12. 'Comedy and Modern Allegory', op. cit., pp. 1-2.
13. Wilson Harris, 'The Quest for Form', *Kunapipi*, V, 1 (1983), p. 25.
14. See Gay Clifford, *The Transformations of Allegory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 29, who sees 'a belief in the possibility of transformation as a recurrent element in all allegorical writing.
15. Wilson Harris, in *Kas-Kas*, ed. Ian Munro and Reinhard Sander (Austin, Texas: The African and Afro-American Research Institute, 1972), p. 54.
16. 'The Quest for Form', op. cit., p. 25.
17. Hena Maes-Jelinek, in 'The Pure Substance of Life: *Palace of the Peacock*', in *Common Wealth*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Aarhus: Univ. of Aarhus, 1971), p. 132, identifies two planes of allegory in this text, 'the material and historical on the one hand, and the spiritual and psychological on the other'.
18. Hena Maes-Jelinek, *The Naked Design* (Aarhus: Dangaroo, 1976), p. 28.
19. The difference between these two modes of allegorical representation is explained in Barney, op. cit.
20. In a review of *The Angel at the Gate*, *Kunapipi*, VI, 1 (1984), pp. 109-10, Joyce Sparer Adler notes that 'the purpose of the protagonist's quest in Harris's novels is not a vision of totality or absolute truth, which in his eyes are associated with unbearable terror and beauty'. This represents a significant variation on the basic model of the allegorical quest.
21. Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Ambivalent Clio: *In the Heart of the Country and Carnival* (paper presented at the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies conference, June 1986), p. 7.
22. See Roberto Gonzales Echevarría, *Alejo Carpentier: The Pilgrim at Home* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 259.
23. See Eddie Baugh, 'The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History', *Tapia*, 7, No 8 (1977), pp. 6-7; 8, No 9 (1977), pp. 6-7, 11.
24. See Wilson Harris, 'Character and Philosophic Myth', in *Essays in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. Britta Olinder (Gothenburg: Gothenburg Univ. Commonwealth Studies, 1984), especially pp. 124-25.
25. 'On the Beach', op. cit., p. 335.
26. 'Adversarial Contexts and Creativity', op. cit., p. 128.
27. 'On the Beach', op. cit., pp. 336, 335.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
29. 'Comedy and Modern Allegory', op. cit., p. 16.
30. 'Adversarial Contexts and Creativity', op. cit., p. 128.

Wilson Harris's Divine Comedy of Existence: Miniaturizations of the Cosmos in *Palace of the Peacock*

Although the European world which accepted the allegory of Dante's *Divina Commedia* no longer exists, the concept of a sovereign ideal, Christian and European, governing humanity is still prevalent in Western civilization. The idea of a homogeneous world has been imposed on all parts of society so that those groups and individuals outside this concept of society are inevitably suppressed as alien to it. This view of the unity of all minds has been a problematic one even within 'homogeneous' cultures (for example, Tuscany of Dante's time), but it is completely ineffectual in dealing with the fragmented nature of the multi-cultural 20th century — the heterogeneous cultures of the New World in particular.

Literature in the Caribbean is often centred on the effects of colonialism, the variegated ethnicity of the area — African, Amerindian and European among others — and the ways these groups interrelate in a post-colonial age. The novelists of the Caribbean reflect these concerns by rejecting the conventions of the traditional novel since it is 'an accumulating of selected elements meant to consolidate the world view of a dominating section of society and to persuade the reader that the plane on which the narrative develops has an inevitable and unquestionable existence'.¹ This has posed a problem for post-colonial writers since they have inherited both the form and the language of the colonial masters. The response on the part of many of the writers of the Caribbean and Latin America has been to create a literature which is a complex reworking of the myth of what Hegel would have called 'the unified spirit'. Helen Tiffin in her study of myth and metaphor in the Caribbean states:

Metaphoric activity in post-colonial writing is thus likely to be more culturally functional than poetically decorative, more self-consciously concerned with the problem of expressing the new in the language of the old, and more concerned with the

importance of language, art, literature *not* just as expressions of new perceptions of paradox, but *as active agents in the reconstruction of the colonial psyche...*² (my italics)

Wilson Harris, a Guyanese-born novelist, poet and critic, explores the culturally-mixed heritage of the Caribbean in his essays and novels. He has been seen as a difficult writer in that his language, imagery and thematic concerns attempt to dislodge the concepts of totality to expose what is 'other' in the dominant ideal. Anthony Boxill in explaining his difficulties with Harris quotes W.I. Carr, who notes that Harris's images of the Guyanese landscape are 'wrapped in so personal a symbolism that communication itself is only partial'.³ Exactly! Harris stresses that all our perceptions are partial — including the hegemonic viewpoint. In his critical essay, 'A Talk on the Subjective Imagination', Harris states that 'to a major extent, we are dominated by what I would call a homogeneous imperative. We are dominated by that, and therefore we fail to see that the homogeneous imperative very often masks or conceals from us the heterogeneous roots of a community.'⁴ Harris is dedicated to expose the 'heterogeneous roots' of Caribbean culture, so that the concept of a sovereign ideal governing humanity will be called into question. What is 'other' in the society, under this imperative, is viewed as a contradiction of the society, yet it is precisely this contradiction which disrupts any concept of totality. The philosopher, T.W. Adorno, expresses this inconsistency:

Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primary of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself.

What we differentiate will appear divergent, dissonant, negative for just so long as the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity...⁵

Wilson Harris, in his imaginative fiction, strives to break through the conventions of traditional Western thought to unmask what has been heretofore suppressed as a contradiction to the unified ideal. In his approach to literature, Harris moves away from the concept of an absolute — rigid distinctions of subject and object, identity and non-identity — towards a mutuality in which all cultures share the burden of humanity. He creates a 20th Century 'divine comedy of existence' in which, rather than the 'homogeneous imperative' demanded by the dominant culture, a potential for a meaningful 'dialogue' between oppressed and dominant cultures is explored. Harris's literary style disrupts the linear, conventional novel and expresses, through his language, imagery and thematics, the possibility of a world in which no image is sovereign, no culture supreme, no word a static fact.

Palace of the Peacock, Harris's first novel as well as the opening book of the *Guiana Quartet*, has been seen as a seminal book which 'contains an embryo of all further developments' in his later novels.⁶ Therefore I have chosen this novel and Harris's use of 'reductive symbols of the cosmos' to elucidate Harris's attempt to reveal, through his fiction, a mutuality between what is called the 'third world' and the dominant world of the former colonialists. *The term 'reductive' does not mean an over-simplification as in 'reductivism' but rather a partial vision of the whole universe which would be too excruciating to bear in its totality.* Through this phrase, Harris illustrates our inability to comprehend all of creation: 'There is no total or absolute model for the universe — only through reductive symbols of the cosmos are we able to bear the beauty and terror of the universe.'⁷ It is through certain miniaturizations charged with allusive power rather than absolute symbols that we can possibly glimpse the fragility as well as the wholeness of the universe:

What is required at a certain level — if a new dialogue is to begin to emerge — is a penetration of partial images, not a submission to the traditional reinforcement of partiality into total or absolute institution; partiality may then begin to declare itself for what it is and to acquire a re-creative susceptibility to otherness in a new and varied evolution of community within a fabric of images in fiction and drama...⁸

Through a discussion of reductive symbols or miniaturizations in Harris's imagery, and the use of supposed sovereign images, we will explore the potential for dialogue between cultures where before there was merely a pattern of conquest.

The plot of *Palace of the Peacock* is deceptively simple. An ethnically-mixed crew under the leadership of the conquistador Donne follow the Amerindian folk, the Arawaks, up-river into the jungle of Guyana to force the folk to work as cheap forced labour on Donne's plantation. Throughout the treacherous journey, the crew (following the steps of an identical first crew who were drowned) are stripped of their imperialist desires as they search for spiritual self-realization. They reach the end of the journey at the Palace of the Peacock, which is situated within a towering waterfall. Much of the background and memory of the novel comes from Harris's own voyages into the Amazon basin as a surveyor. The landscape of the Guyanese jungle was excruciatingly beautiful yet treacherous; a small stone jutting above the sparkling water might conceal jagged rocks to tear a boat and its inhabitants to pieces, yet the river would appear calm, crystalline and lovely in the sunlight. It was this affinity of beauty and terror, often perceived as opposites in our identification of them, that led Harris to question sovereign views about nature

and humanity. Each one of the partial images betrays a world barely glimpsed at, containing traces of vanished cultures. Undefined by a linear sense of time, Harris's jungle becomes the landscape which maps out the possibility of dialogue between oppressed and dominant cultures.

Although reductive symbols work on multiple levels in *Palace of the Peacock*, I will focus on three main ways Harris utilizes this approach — the I-narrator and his dream, the imagery, and the blending together of cross-cultural symbols. The I-narrator's dream is the framing structure of the novel, reducing the reality of the action to that of the nether world. Throughout the novel the I-narrator is constantly awaking, yet each time he wakes up, we have to question whether he is, in fact, awake or if that, too, is part of his dream. Harris explains his motives in refusing to accept static notions of dreaming and waking: 'The logic of the dream allows us to split the image. We are left with a cosmic note ... nothing is sovereign.'⁹ The state of being awake or asleep is seen *not* as contrasting aspects of consciousness but as a mediating interrelationship of our varied perceptions.

The I-narrator, who is nameless, is our guide throughout most of the novel, yet in Book III, 'The Second Death', he vanishes from the narration only to return at the end. The reason for the loss of the guide at the crucial time of the second drowning may be that, through his vulnerability, the I-narrator has partially learned what the crew has yet to know, but the loss of the narrator also directs our attention towards another dominant structure — narration. W.J. Howard in his study of the *Guiana Quartet* addresses this issue by noting that the 'whole problem of the relationship between the narrator and the activity he narrates must be reconsidered'.¹⁰ In re-evaluating this relationship, even our general assumptions concerning first person narratives must be reworked and the narration itself becomes a threshold into a counterpoint between the conditioned mind (conditioned by authoritarian imperative) and the shock of new awareness within capacities for a true voice and a true dialectic ear or response to Being. The fact that the I-narrator is nameless separates him from the other members of the crew and aligns him with the nameless 'folk'. Through the I-narrator, Harris emphasizes 'the positive value of «identityless-ness» ... as a means towards a genuine re-sensing of the world'.¹¹ It is the I-narrator's vulnerability which is turned around to be a sign of the potential for growth.

In addition to his non-authoritarian narration and his namelessness, the I-narrator is also reduced as a protagonist: He is the weakened, half-blind twin of the conquerer Donne. The relationship between the I-narrator and Donne is a miniaturization of the relationship of oppressed

to dominant cultures. Donne is the imperialist; he abuses his brother and the folk. His treatment of his Amerindian woman Mariella as well as his cruelty to the folk in general compel them to vanish into the rain forest when he tries to recruit them: 'Donne was brooding a little ... his face growing severe as of old, spoilt, hard, childish with an old obsession and desire... «Look what's happening now. Nearly everybody just vamoosed, vanished. They're as thoughtless and irresponsible as hell... Isn't it a fantastic joke that I have to bargain with them at all?»'¹² We see Donne with the colonialist attitude of 'owning' the folk, without any understanding of their lives and his relationship to them, even though he is also part Amerindian. His twin brother, the I-narrator, is controlled by Donne, but through his weakness, he comes closer to comprehending both his and Donne's true kinship with the folk. He tries to explain it to Donne, who is not listening, as he tells Donne that this aggression towards the folk is a 'fear of the substance of life, fear of the substance of the folk, a cannibal blind fear in oneself' (p. 59). The concept of blindness raised here is one that Harris uses to further the sense that our vision is always partial; clarity is sometimes false. We have noted that the I-narrator is disadvantaged because of his partial blindness which he may consolidate into a 'clarity'. He tells us, 'I dreamt I awoke with one dead seeing eye and one living closed eye' (p. 13). Throughout the journey, his closed eye becomes an opening towards spiritual sight while Donne's clarity of vision is an image of blindness. The I-narrator, like the 'disadvantaged' cultures he appears to represent, is able to dislodge the barriers of a closed identity through his vulnerability; it is Donne, with the dominant code he espouses, who must become totally blind to gain a capacity for mutuality with his brother and the folk.

The second, and perhaps the most noticeable use of miniaturizations in *Palace of the Peacock* is the imagery. The novel's imagery is as dense and fertile as the Guyanese jungle Harris describes; within this jungle are layers upon layers of appearance and meaning which can neither be stripped away nor taken at face value. The crew, as well as the reader, must content themselves with only partial understanding of a universe that neither science nor philosophy has completely deciphered. The reductive symbols of the cosmos are, therefore, signs which lend some kind of understanding to what is incomprehensible in its totality. Two examples of the complex imagery will suggest the working of miniaturizations in the novel. The first example is one that I have already mentioned in passing but at this point we will look at it more closely. The greatest danger of travelling into the interior of the Guyanese rain forest by river is the violent rapids which can destroy both craft and crew. On a

symbolic as well as a literal level, it is precisely the deceptive moment of calm — unexpected — which is the most treacherous. The I-narrator is speaking:

‘The rapids appeared less dangerous before and after us... I detected a pale smooth patch that hardly seemed worth a thought. It was the size of the moon’s reflection in streaming water save that the moment I saw it was broad daylight. The river hastened everywhere around ... the pale moon patch of death which spun before them calm as a musical disc... They bowed and steered in the nick of time away from the evasive, faintly discernible unconscious head whose meek moon patch heralded corrugations and thorns and spears we dimly saw in a volcanic and turbulent bosom of water.’ (p. 33)

There is much activity in Harris’s rich, metaphoric language, but I would like to explore two aspects of this passage relating to the use of reductive symbols. It is obvious that clarity may sometimes prove a deceptive mould. What appears as a reflection of the moon shining upon tranquil waters is actually an indication of the deadly, jagged rocks below. The moon patch which heralds death is a reductive symbol of the moon, opening up a partial understanding of the ‘mediating forces’¹³ of the river, the rocks, the sun and the moon. The image also exposes our own contradictory notions concerning the moon. The moon itself is clearly a reduction of the sun, reflecting merely the sun’s rays, and in nature the moon is both beneficial and destructive to human beings: It brings a plentiful harvest as well as damaging tidal waves. In our conscious minds, the moon is viewed antithetically as an impetus for love as well as insanity. Finally, because of the transient quality of perceptions, the moon patch is transformed in the crew’s eyes into a symbol of human technology, a musical disc, and then into the volcanic and turbulent water befitting the vicious rocks below.

The second example of the use of reductive symbols functions as a motif throughout the novel, but we will look specifically at one incident. I have mentioned that Donne abused the folk, especially his woman Mariella. The folk leave the mission, named after Mariella, and disappear into the forest to escape from Donne. An old Arawak woman is left behind and Donne and his crew take her by force to act as a guide to lead them to the folk and to protect them from the violent rapids. She allows herself to be taken, having ‘the unfathomable patience of a god in whom all is charged into wisdom, all experience and all life a handkerchief of wisdom when the grandiloquence of history and civilization was past’ (p. 72). At this point the Arawak woman appears as a muse who contains all of life’s wisdom in her kerchief. The passage is further

charged as the woman herself becomes a miniaturization for both nature and the wisdom of humanity:

Tiny embroideries resembling the handwork on the Arawak woman's kerchief and the wrinkles on her brow turned to incredible and fast soundless breakers of foam. Her crumpled bosom and the river grew agitated with desire, bottling and shaking every fear and inhibition and outcry. The ruffles in the water were her dress rolling and rising to embrace the crew. This sudden insolence of soul rose and caught them ... with silent streaming majesty and abnormal youth and in a wave of freedom and strength. (p. 73)

The interrelationship of the Arawak woman and the river is not necessarily a causal one; it is impossible to determine whether the Arawak woman is causing the rapids' agitation or if the river has blown new life and strength into the old woman. But what is clear is that the Arawak woman muse shares the burden of the violent waters with the crew and protects them from crashing while, at the same time, she opens their eyes to spiritual sight: 'The crew were transformed by the awesome spectacle of a voiceless soundless motion... Earthquake and volcanic water appeared to seize them and stop their ears *dashing the scales only from their eyes*. They saw the naked unequivocal flowing peril and beauty and soul of the pursuer and the pursued all together...' (p. 73; my italics). Harris explains that the Arawak woman becomes a force to break the system of oppression, yet although 'on the precipice of disaster, the monolith is broken, there is the tendency to go back to the monolithic'.¹⁴ It is at this moment of vision, when the scales fall from their eyes, that a potential for dialogue is reached which wards off catastrophe. But it lasts only for a moment. Immediately after, the crew are again concerned with their imperialist desires.

The crew's personal and societal views lead into the third section of this paper — Harris's blending of supposed sovereign, cross-cultural archetypes as reductive symbols. Symbols which have been purported to be absolute in Western culture, such as Christ and the seven days of creation, become partial images in *Palace of the Peacock*. The final part of the crew's journey up-river, once they are no longer pursuing the folk, is their ascent into the palace situated in the waterfall. The crew, whose members are of diverse parentage — both individually and collectively, can be seen as a reductive symbol of the ethnically-mixed Guyanas. This may be further extended as an archetypal view of the composite cultures of the New World. Each member of the crew shares the burden of their internal voyage with the others, and, unlike the first crew that drowns, this crew arrives at the palace. The success of the crew further intimates

that the mixture of cultures need not be destructive but *could* lead to a closer alignment with the universe.

At the palace, the remainder of the crew look into the waterfall windows and envision the carpenter Christ painting the world. In the next window is the madonna and child, yet this madonna, on second look, is Mariella, Donne's battered woman, as well as the Arawak woman made young again as in the scene in the river. This muse of Amerindian mythology shares the palace with the son of Christianity as does the Spider of the African Anancy tales through Wishrop, a member of the crew. What has hitherto been perceived as hegemonic becomes one strain in the heterophony of human discourse. The sun, a sovereign image in many cultures as well as for the conquistador Donne, becomes partial as it breaks into stars that become the eyes in the peacock's tail. At this point many supposed absolute symbols are blended, breaking through the bonds of a single world view:

The bark and the wood [possibly from the tree of life] turned to lightning flesh and the sun which had been suspended from its head rippled and broke into stars that stood where the shattered leaves had been in the living wake of the storm... The stars became the peacock's eyes and the great tree of flesh and blood swirled into another stream that sparkled with divine feathers where the neck and the hands and the feet had been nailed. (p. 146)

The peacock itself, an ancient symbol of resurrection, incorporates the contradictory notions of humanity: It is a reductive symbol for the vanity and conceit of the crew at the beginning as well as for the potential 'power of metamorphosis and renewal'.¹⁵ Finally, Dante's 'music of the spheres' is played through crew member Carroll's 'small mouthpiece' which starts out as a whistle, then a cry, and, at last, the squawk of the peacock. But what has been viewed as a comical sound for such a magnificent bird becomes a rich melody as yet unheard: 'It seemed to break and mend itself always — tremulous, forlorn, distant, triumphant, the echo of sound so pure and outlined in space it broke again into a mass of music' (p. 147).

Through the partial images of the figures within the palace, the crew is reunited with the folk, and from the death of the crew's material desires comes the potential for rebirth. With this possibility, the whole notion of death as annihilation is also called into question. 'Absolute death is polarization ... it seems to lie in the individual's ... inability to go beyond fixed points.'¹⁶ And, of course, the thrust of the entire novel is to expose alternatives in the face of absolute determinants — yet, lest we be lulled into a complacency towards life in our response to a chance at 'rebirth',

we must look closely at the potential for regeneration that Harris is posing. The rebirth of the crew has been fraught with the death of some members and the mutilation of others, so their understanding comes at a cosmic cost. And it is clear from the ending that the rebirth itself is only partial, only within their potential, as the seven-day journey to the palace becomes a reductive symbol for creation.

At the crew's journey's end is a beginning and each member under the command of the peacock hugs to himself 'his true invisible otherness and opposition, his true alien spiritual love without cruelty and confusion in the blindness and frustration of desire' (p. 152). Harris reminds us in the next passage that this moment of unity is not to last: The crew fall from one another and themselves; the distance between oneself and one's 'otherness' is an unmeasured space, never totally fathomed, denying the rigid sense of self which translates into an absolute. To return to T.W. Adorno and his view of the reconciliation of what is other in identity, we can see a correlation with Harris's sense of partiality in which nothing is absolute, not even resolution: 'The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own.'¹⁷ Although the crew's first journey ended in catastrophe, the second journey recreates the past so that there is a possibility of dialogue between Donne (dominant culture) and the folk (oppressed culture). What is at the heart of the I-narrator's dream, and the novel itself, is that we can call into question the burden of the past and, through that process, engender the seeds of rebirth.

'In *Palace of the Peacock*, there is an invocation of indestructible harmony at the heart of the cosmos, but this can only remain a sensitive ... apprehension within a *caveat* or warning against self-deceptive blind bounty or bias.'¹⁸ In his imaginative fiction, we see that Harris's 'divine comedy of existence', itself a reduction of Dante's allegory, is based on one's acceptance of the partial symbols sharing the burden of humanity. These symbols through which we glimpse the universe can never be fully apprehended. This paradox, Harris states, 'implies a profound irony and divine comedy of existence':

Thus it is as if the cosmos reduces itself to translate infinite catastrophe (ingrained into human sovereign expectations or habits) into ceaselessly finite but mutual deaths, mutual rebirths, and infinitude of incarnations or annunciations of humanity. Such finitude fissures every sovereign death wish into an open, groping, sometimes terrifying corridor of the imagination.¹⁹

Although the breaking away from the concepts of unity may be a terrifying rupture, it may indeed avoid the catastrophic results of denying what is 'other' in ourselves. For this vision contains the seeds of regeneration for our dying civilization as well as the recreation of vanished cultures towards a mutuality of existence.

Wilson Harris, in his fiction and essays, is suggesting an upheaval in the way in which the world has been viewed in Western thought since Aristotle. This imaginative critique of a sovereign world view stands within a broader attack on the concept of a unified spirit governing humanity. The scope of this attack ranges from writers who come from areas designated by the West as the 'other' world to Western philosophers such as T.W. Adorno and Jacques Derrida. We have seen in this paper how closely aligned Adorno's critique of 'primal identity' as that which suppresses the alien is to Harris's exploration of what has been oppressed by a dominant ideology in heterogeneous cultures. Therefore, it may be argued that the critique of a sovereign world view comes necessarily at this point in history as we confront the fragmented, yet global nature of the 20th Century. And as individuals within the collective cultures of the Americas, we must extend this critique outside the realm of literature and philosophy to expose the diverse limbs of our cultural roots, so that, rather than trying to destroy what is 'other' in our mixed heritage and ourselves, we will embrace it in its otherness.

NOTES

1. Hena Maes-Jelinek, *Wilson Harris* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), p. 1.
2. Helen Tiffin, 'The Metaphor of Anancy in Caribbean Literature', *Myth and Metaphor*, ed. Robert Sellick (Sydney: CRNLE, 1982), p. 15.
3. Anthony Boxill, 'Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*: A New Dimension in West Indian Fiction', *College Language Association Journal*, 14 (June 1971), p. 381.
4. Wilson Harris, *Explorations* (Mundelstrup: Dangaroo Press, 1981), p. 57.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 5. Much of the theoretical base for this paper has been drawn from Adorno's critique of Hegel's dialectics towards a 'negative dialectics' which returns the constant sense of non-identity in identity.
6. Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Wilson Harris', *West Indian Literature*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 182.
7. Wilson Harris, personal comment during seminar. I am extremely grateful to Wilson Harris for helping me formulate my thoughts on this novel through long conversations and a formal seminar.
8. Harris, *Explorations*, p. 116.
9. Harris, personal comment.

10. W.J. Howard, 'Wilson Harris's *Guiana Quartet*: From Personal Myth to National Identity', *Ariel* 1 (January, 1970), p. 48.
11. Michael Gilkes, *The West Indian Novel* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p. 145.
12. Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 57. All further references to this work appear in the text.
13. Wilson Harris, 'Myth and Metaphor', *Myth and Metaphor*, ed. Robert Sellick, p. 2.
14. Harris, personal comment.
15. Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'The True Substance of Life: Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*', *Common Wealth*, ed. Anna Rutherford (Aarhus: Akademisk Boghandel, 1971), p. 158.
16. Jean-Pierre Durix, 'A Reading of «Paling of Ancestors»', *Commonwealth Newsletter* 9 (January, 1976), p. 33.
17. Adorno, p. 191.
18. Harris, *Explorations*, p. 54.
19. Harris, personal comment.

Edward Baugh

SOMETIMES IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STORY (For the drowned Africans of the Middle Passage)

Sometimes in the middle of the story something
move outside the house, like
it could be the wind, but is not the wind
and the story-teller hesitate so slight
you hardly notice it, and the children
hold their breath, and look at one another.
The old people say is Toussaint passing
on his grey horse Bel-Argent, moving
faster than backra-massa timepiece
know to measure, briefing the captains
setting science and strategy to trap the emperor.
But also that sound had something in it
of deep water, salt water, had ocean
the sleep-sigh of a drowned African
turning in his sleep on the ocean-floor
and Toussaint horse was coming from far
his tail trailing the swish of the sea
from secret rendezvous, from councils of war
with those who never completed the journey,
and we below deck heard only the muffled
thud of scuffling feet, could only
guess the quick, fierce tussle, the
stifled gasp, the barrel-chests bursting
the bubbles rising and breaking, the blue
closing over. But their souls shuttle
still the forest-paths of ocean
connecting us still the current unbroken
the circuits kept open, the tireless messengers
the ebony princes of your lost Atlantis
a power of black men rising from the sea.

Nicolás Guillén

WHAT COLOUR?

‘His skin was black, but with the purest
soul, white as the snow...’

Yevtushenko* (in a cable) on the assassination
of Martin Luther King.

What a white soul, they say,
that noble pastor had.
His skin so black, they say,
his skin so black in colour,
was on the inside snow,
a white lily,
fresh milk,
cotton-wool.
What purity.
There wasn’t one stain
on his very white interior.

(In short, what an extraordinary find:
‘The Black whose soul was white’,
that melodramatic tale.)
But it could be said in another way:
What an excellent black soul
the very gentle pastor had.
What a superior black passion
burned in his open heart.
What pure black thoughts
his fertile brain nourished.
What black love
So shared
With everybody.

And why not,
why could he not have a black soul
that heroic pastor?

Black as coal.

*Yevgenii Yevtushenko (b. 1933): modern Russian poet.

I HAVE

When I see myself and touch myself
I, John, a Nobody only yesterday,
and today John with everything,
and today with everything.
I glance around, I look,
I see myself and touch myself
and I ask myself how has it been possible.

I have, let's see,
I have the pleasure of walking through my country,
owner of all there is in it,
looking very closely at what
I didn't have, nor could have before.
I can say cane,
I can say mountain,
I can say city,
I can say army,
now mine forever and yours, ours,
and a vast splendour
of sunbeam, star, flower.

I have, let's see,
I have the pleasure of going,
I, a peasant, a worker, a simple man,
I have the pleasure of going
(just an example)

to a bank and speaking with the manager,
not in English,
not as 'Sir',
but calling him 'compañero' as we say in Spanish.

I have, let's see,
that being black
no one can stop me,
at the door of a dancing hall or a bar.
Or even in a hotel lobby
yelling at me there are no rooms
not a small room not a large one
or a tiny room where I might rest.

I have, let's see,
there are no rural police
to seize me and lock me in a precinct jail
or uproot me from my land
and cast me in the middle of the highways.

I have the land and I have the sea,
no country-club, no high life,
no tennis and no yacht
but from beach to beach and wave on wave,
gigantic, blue, open, democratic:
in short the sea.

I have, let's see,
I've learned to read
to count,
I have that I've learned to write,
and to think
and to laugh.
I have, now,
a place to work
and earn
what I have to eat.
I have, let's see,
I have, what I had to have.

SONG OF RETURN

Do you know
the land of the rice and bamboo?
Don't you know it?
Now, I've come from Peking
Peking,
without mandarin
nor palanquin.
Also I have been in Shanghai:
there is not even one Yankee in Shanghai.
Over there
life is blossoming.
You can see
how life is burgeoning.

Sing with me, friend
and say as I say!
There is not
not even one Yankee in Shanghai.
Peking,
the coffin of the mandarin.
Run to see,
the land of the rice and bamboo!

Translated by Salvador Ortiz-Carboneres.

Madeline Coopsammy

THE SECOND MIGRATION

Whoever were those mocking gods
who thought it fit to lead us
from the green wastes of the Indo-Gangetic
to the sweet swards of the Caroni
then in a new migration
to Manitoba's alien corn
never thought to state
the price to be exacted
or how or where it would be paid.
Images of a just society dangled
harlot-like before our eyes
we thought that here at last and now at last
the spectres of colour
would never haunt
our work, our children's lives, our play
that in the many-faceted mosaic
we, angled and trimmed to fit
would find ourselves our corner of the earth.
How could we not know
that time, which heals
just as frequently destroys
and like the sixties flower darlings
we too, would soon become anachronisms
be reminders of a time
a time of joy and greening
We are the mistakes of a liberal time
you did not really court us, it is true
rather, purging us with sugar-coated pills of
medicals and points and two official languages
your tolerant humanity
festered woundings of 'brain drain'

while our leaders pleaded, impotent in agony
'Do not take our best!'
'We want your best,
No Notting Hills for us,' you warned.
And so again we crossed an ocean
convinced that little Notting Hills we'd never be.
Now lounging in our bite-sized backyards
and pretending that we do not see
the curling vapours of our neighbour's burger feast
(the third this week)
wafting across the picket fence
we know that careless of our birthright
we have sold it for
a mess of pottage.

RECESSION AND THE THIRD WORLD IMMIGRANT

This honey-flowing milk and maple-syrup land
Promised a new beginning.
No longer sure of friend or foe
They fled in hope
And left the victors pecking at the spoils
As massa's day now done
He lightly shrugged aside his burden.
For the drums no longer summoned them
To bacchanalian joy
But tom-tom like
They throbbed a coming holocaust.
In despair
Like Israelites of old
They fled
To find the promised land.
The land was vast and wide
They knew
But shivered in the throes of its
Retreating glacial cover.

Yet when the winter waned
The time of love and joy and corn proved sweet and easy
The natives sang a song of welcome
As moving over gently, they swore
There's room for all.
Gullibly the strangers thought
The promise of the Spring and Summer's opulence
Would never fail
But now the land is vast and wide and cold
Suspicion, strife and envy greet them
From the circle to the island
The land is bone
Will this winter of opprobrium, want and discord never end?

Lorna Goodison

SURVIVOR

The strangers passed through here
for years, laying waste the countryside.
They took most living things
even some rare species
With half-extended wings
They took them all
now that genus is extinct.
(Lord) They were thorough in their plunderings.
So here the wind plays long mourning notes
on bones that once were ribs (savages!)
They broke them when they'd finished eating
and you know how creative God is with ribs.

That survivor over there
With bare feet and bound hair
has some seeds stored under her tongue
and one remaining barrel of rain.
She will go indoors
When her planting is done,
loosen her hair
and tend to her son
and over the bone flute music
and the dead story it tells,
listen for grace songs from her ankle bells.

Frederick D'Aguiar

EARTH

i

In the end we come to you and prostrate.
We bear the black mark on our foreheads
Once the Muezzin's preserve.
You will open for our entry
Clean as a dive, and the rings—
A bark's years-stockpile,
Will be all the pool widens.

ii Stone & Shell

I used a stone to pound a shell;
I pounded it to smithereens
Then ground it into dust.

Now the shell is hushed;
I weigh the stone against the dust.

AIRY HALL AUTUMN

A gust throws
the white undersides
of leaves
to the light.
Few loosen,
weave a slowed,
ziggurat fall.

We run one way,
jab air another
to catch any.
Most grip a thick dark,
and in mid-air
frame the four corners
of stars stared at.

For just one feel
as their dry spines
crumble in your moist hand,
that its kept warmth,
a fresh, veined leaf,
may keep this season,
grab, be airborne and grab.

North and South — A Look at Walcott's *Midsummer*

I propose in this paper to look at a new area of concern which appears in Walcott's poetry since he left Trinidad to reside in the United States.¹ The two volumes appearing since then, *The Fortunate Traveller* (1982) and *Midsummer* (1984), are interesting for what they document of his responses to this change of scene. Most outstanding in this respect is the heightened awareness, on Walcott's part, of the contemporary reality of an international milieu, turning as it does on the axis of relations between the super powers and the Third World, between the metropolitan North and the underdeveloped South. I will focus on *Midsummer* to examine Walcott's engagement with this particular concern.

Curiously enough, most reviewers of *Midsummer* have missed this preoccupation or overlooked it altogether. They have tended to respond mainly to the technical and stylistic strengths of Walcott's verse, which are certainly considerable in this volume. Michael Gilkes, reviewing the book for *Caribbean Contact*, makes this judgment:

For Walcott, whose element is metaphor, there is, however, a mesmeric quality to sheer perception. This limits and often prevents observation from evolving into more than a style, a reordering of form.... *Midsummer's* focus is uncompromisingly on poetic language and structure, its underlying desire for permanence, for 'eternal lines', not engagement.²

This has been the general response. Terry Eagleton seems to have been the only one sensitive to the creative tensions implicit in Walcott's peculiar cultivation of language in this work. He observes:

To write like Walcott of Caribbean canefields 'set like stanzas' is to be wryly conscious of the rift between Third World agriculture and that other form of cultivation which is poetry.... Language never fits geography, Walcott reflects, and the imagination must therefore weave its own cosmopolitan correspondences, dismantling and reassembling places, playing off one native dialect against another.³

Midsummer does range, in fact, over a number of distinct concerns. There are poems dealing with Walcott's assessment of his life's work, prompted by the personal burden of this 'last third of his life'; poems which return to the untiring question of the Imagination as it serves reality; poems that commute, like Walcott himself, between the metropolitan scenes of North America and the Caribbean landscape. It may be that the connecting thread of engagement is lost as one moves from one subject to the other. Walcott is, however, as intensely engaged as ever in serious moral responses to these preoccupations. We can make value-judgments about these responses, but we cannot say that they are not there.

The burden of relations between the two worlds of North and South, our specific subject here, takes a special prominence in this volume, and engages his close attention. Several significant aspects of his perspective on the subject stand out, and are focused in some of the strongest poems of the volume. He looks closely, for example, at the pressures and strains of what he describes as 'hemispheres [that] lie sweating, flesh to flesh'; he is acutely sensitive to the climate of global warfare that envelops and exacerbates these tensions. He addresses some of the critical issues involved in an eight-piece sequence on Cuba, the classic product, in his native Caribbean zone, of the collision between North and South, presaged as this is by the conflict between the two ideological worlds of the North's East and West.

Walcott's own attitudes to this shift to North America are reflected in the content and underlying viewpoint of *Midsummer*. He sees himself essentially as traveller, rather than as emigré or poet in exile. This is the starting point of his perspective on the contrasting and unequal worlds of North and South in relation to each other. As traveller, he has come to other climes a seasoned Caribbean poet, and he experiences the stronger gravitational pull back to Caribbean soil. Thus, the midsummer symbol (around which cluster related combinations of meaning) invokes his own tropical climate to situate him in his native habitat both physically and in sensibility. The book thus begins with a sequence on Trinidad. From that home base, he makes his excursions North (covering Europe and the United States) and South. The midsummer symbol, at the same time, stands for that high point of summer at which one season spans all climes. Thus: 'Summer is the same/ everywhere' (VIII, ll. 9-10). Accordingly, the midsummer motif expands to embrace the global overview and universalist reaches to which Walcott's travels naturally lead.

The book begins with the return summer trip⁴ to Trinidad, and renders the impact of the first painful image the landscape presents to one

who has just left the sharply contrasting city-scapes of North America. Flying over Trinidad, Walcott is struck first by a 'dereliction of sunlight' — an image which graphically captures the effect, on coming to the tropics, of a sudden brightness that betrays only the sprawl of poverty. Back on Trinidadian soil, he is assailed by the various impressions of the rawness and poverty of life, of reduced and cramped conditions. He takes a look at the seething commerce amid lower-class vendors and hustlers in down-town Port of Spain, a view most representative of this would-be modern capital of Trinidad. It presents the image of a place still 'dammed' in the rut of underprivilege. He describes it thus:

This Spanish port, piratical in diverseness,
with its one-eyed lighthouse, this damned sea of noise,

...

You can watch it become
more African hourly — crusted roofs, hot as skillets
peppered with cries; between fast-fry wagons,
floating seraphic Muslims cannot make it hush.

...

Stay on the right bank in the imperial dream —

(IV, ll. 1-12)

This is the characteristic tone of the Third World ghetto, pre-urban, still trapped in barrack yard standards of living, and at a very far remove from the metropolitan world he has left behind. Odd traces of modern cosmopolitan influences do appear in this scene, featured in the presence of 'floating seraphic Muslims' who have come on the wave of popular oriental cults flooding the Western world. Walcott's explicit point is that the scene still retains the anachronistic 19th century image of natives in the barrack yard. The 20th century outlook, in other words, has not changed much and the old imperial structure, whatever its new guise, still shows through the large inequalities between developed and underprivileged nations. For Walcott, therefore, to return to these sights is to be assaulted anew by the burdensome love he bears the landscape. He is provoked to despair at the intransigence of its backyard status, and, at the same time, drawn back to the human strengths behind its familiar 'dust and ordinariness'. His recovery of this deep organic bond reminds him of 'Borges' blind love for Buenos Aires' (VI, l. 26).

The poem which immediately follows shifts to the metropolitan ghetto in New York. In this scene of Third World migrants in the heart of New York, the two worlds come closest to each other physically, and Walcott takes a critical look at the social and political complexion of that weird contact. New York's Fourteenth Street presents the picture of a veritable

potpourri, a 'colourful' confusion, as the city's depressed elements hustle a living along its sidewalks. Migrant groups are especially conspicuous, with Hispanics and West Indians huckstering exotic bits of their culture. The Third World seems to have quite taken over. Walcott renders the ironies of the scene. The satiric edge of his portrait is enhanced by the sheer verbal playfulness that continues to enliven his style:

In muslim midsummer along Fourteenth Street, hucksters
with cardboard luggage stacked near the peeling rind
of advertisements have made the Big Apple a mango;
shy as wallflowers at first, the dazed high-rises
rock to reggae and salsa; democracy's price is
two steps forward and three steps back in the Aztec tango
of assimilation, with no bar to the barrio.

(V, ll. 6-12)

It is a grim reflection, as the poem goes on to state, of what the politics of patronage and America's open-door policy to its wards (dependent allies) amount to: a negative 'tolerance' that produces this kind of exercise in minstrelsy and prostitution. The decadence affects unfortunate migrants and host-country alike. Walcott penetrates here the human tragedy of a forced 'mixing' between North and South, based strictly on political expedience, while all the old barriers of race, culture, and inequality persist.

His essential judgment of that relationship is compressed in this emblematic image from the same poem: 'The hemispheres lie sweating, flesh to flesh,/ on a damp bed.' The image sees that relationship as a forced and loveless mating, sterile, and fraught with pressures and tensions. It also discloses the mutual dependence and essential nakedness of both the strong and weak — which is Walcott's final sense of that misalliance. These tensions, moreover, contribute in large measure to the pervasive climate of war and aggression. The sense of worldwide war and aggression is one of the things that has registered most powerfully on Walcott's consciousness since this spell in North America. It is an authentic experience. The newcomer to the States has the sensation of being bombarded by news of wars near and distant pouring in to a veritable centre. The war ethos of present times emerges as one of the most powerful themes in the two latest volumes, and is accompanied by a corresponding urge towards peace, which strikes, perhaps, the deepest chords in Walcott's poetry at this stage. We will return to this feature later.

As traveller spanning both weak and strong nations, however, his gaze

lights especially on the picture of global warfare that lies open beneath. In an outstanding sonnet in the sequence, an aerial survey reveals the dynamic that brings the entire 20th century world into one compass: one single war-charge gathers force from his own setting at the far edges of the world right up to its nodes at the centres of power. Thus:

Rest, Christ! from tireless war. See it's midsummer,
but what roars in the throat of the oaks is martial man,

. . .

Along the island the almonds seethe with anger,
the wind that churns these orchards of white surf
and whistles dervishes up from the hot sand
revolves this globe, this painted O that spins,
reciting as it moves, tribes, frontiers,
dots that are sounds, cities that love their names,

(XXII, ll. 1-14)

Walcott is concerned in this poem to put his fingers on the root sources on that peculiar ethos that causes 'nation to take on nation'.

Though they have different sounds for 'God' or 'hunger',
the opposing alphabets in city squares
shout with one voice, nation takes on nation,
and, from their fury of pronunciation
children lie torn on rubble for a noun.

(XXII, ll. 16-20)

He zeroes in on the old problem of bigotry between peoples, of their blind intolerance of each other's creeds and systems. The tragic irony is that in the righteous extremes of each to defend his own, the original human factor becomes eclipsed and life itself destroyed. Walcott looks here at the tyranny of ideology over the human mind as a specific phenomenon of modern times.

The ideological issue crops up quite frequently in this volume and he shows a keen sense of the political realities involved. A clear and consistent position emerges on the issue. The ideological strongholds of West and East are to him imperial systems first and last. He starts out with a native dread of the imperial principle at the heart of the purism of Left and Right alike. It is not a matter of political agnosticism on Walcott's part. Simone de Beauvoir defines the ideal stance for the intellectual and artist in these times as follows: a non-aligned, neutral position that above all allows her/him the freedom to respond critically to the systems and movements of the time.⁵ It may be necessary to add that to be 'non-aligned' is not to be uncommitted.

The essential aspects of Walcott's perspective on the issue and his sense of its urgency and relevance to the Third World situation, emerges in the eight-piece sequence on Cuba, entitled 'Tropic Zone'. The sequence, one of the finest things in the collection, reproduces a visit to Cuba during which he takes a close-up, sustained view of that country. There is an honesty, an openness, in his first responses to the place. He registers something of the culture-shock of the Westerner to the socialist atmosphere of Cuba ('I know I would feel disoriented/ in Oriente'); he is particularly sensitive to the alienness of a place with a different language; he sees and relates to a pristine emptiness about Cuba, the green landscape of a young nation awaiting development. The full visage of the society, its public features and human aspects gradually unfold as the sequence moves from dawn, through high noon, to siesta time in Cuba.

Responding to such striking features as the signs of a military presence, various municipal features that show the collective system in action, he has deep fears about the dangers of repressive extremes in the system. They are the familiar fears about the dehumanising effects of standardization and regimentation, of the threat to individuality and, most fatally, to independent thought. He expresses it thus:

Imagine the fading hysteria
of peeling advertisements, and note how all graffiti agree
with the government. You might say, Yes, but here are mountains,
park benches, working fountains, a brass band on Sundays,
. . . .
that the three men talk softly, that mothers call
from identical windows for their children to come home,
(XLIII, vii, ll. 9-11)

In his view, the Revolution has swung from the corrupt extremes of the Capitalist system, to another kind of serious damage in its own extremes. He describes it thus:

Now the women who were folded over wrought-iron
balconies like bedsteads, their black manes hanging down,
are not whores with roses but dolls broken in half.
(XLIII, iv, ll. 15-17)

In which, one must admit, socialist Cuba does come off worse (one can do so much more with 'whores with roses' than 'dolls broken in half'). A certain element of sentimentality, really a species of literary nostalgia, does creep into this bias. In another poem, Walcott empathises with the older generation of men whom he sees as remaining in temper beyond the

pale of the revolution. He imagines them recalling the gracious old days of Spanish creole culture, days when 'everyone wore white, and there was grace'. It is doubtful whether these men recall more of those days than of the oppressions of the Batista regime.

Walcott has genuine concerns, however, about the possible directions of Castro's Cuba. He fears, for example, that it might be forced to develop into a system of rule, a mini-Empire in its own right. But the real, sympathetic spirit of his concern, and the breadth of awareness informing his reaction, are expressed in the note on which he leaves Cuba. At the end of his survey of its problems, he makes the following reflection on its destiny:

So what if the hand of the Empire is as slow as
a turtle signing the surf when it comes to treaties?
Genius will come to contradict history,
and that's there in their brown bodies, in the olives of eyes,
(XLIII, vi, ll. 10-13)

The idea is that men are potentially greater than their achievements and their errors, and from among the people will rise the genius that will initiate whatever change is necessary to rescue Cuba from whatever future crisis or dangers it may face. Walcott responds here from a vision diametrically opposed to a deterministic notion of history. It is the deeper vision of history as process, but accords a central role to men of imagination in that process — an essentially revolutionary vision therefore. Tacitly, it is a positive acknowledgement of Castro and his revolutionary Cuba in that process. In other words, Walcott has got, deep down, good vibes from Cuba. Ultimately, it expresses his instinctive goodwill and compassion towards a struggling people.

As a token of this faith and goodwill, he leaves Cuba in a moment of epiphany inspired by a most moving response to its 'hora de siesta'. The Cuban siesta inspires him to a glimpse of the possibility of a rest from strife, a quietude, of the stillness at the centre. He presents these intimations of 'a sacramental stasis':

And I'd let you sleep. Things topple gradually
when the alarm clock, with its conductor's baton,
begins at one: the cattle fold their knees;
...
Down the white beach, calm as a forehead
that has felt the wind, a sacramental stasis
would bring you sleep, which is midsummer's crown,
sleep that divides its lovers without rancor,

sweat without sin, the furnace without fire
calm without self, the dying with no fear,
(XLIII, viii, ll. 8-23)

This poem comes, in fact, as a parting benediction on Cuba.

Finally, we may allow Walcott, who has been engaged in ceaseless toil at this level from the age of eighteen, this impulse towards peace and rest from strife (it does not mean that he will cease to speak). The crowning expression of this impulse occurs in the concluding poem of *The Fortunate Traveller*. The poem is entitled 'The Season of Phantasmal Peace'. It envisions a temporary respite from the clamour and strife of a troubled world — a moment of mirage when the veil is lifted and we glimpse the possibility of 'the peace that passeth all understanding'. The poem effects and is itself that miracle, in the perfect attunements of its imagery, its movement and cadences. It deserves to be quoted at some length:

Then all the nations of birds lifted together
the huge net of the shadows of this earth
in multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues,
stitching and crossing it. They lifted up
the shadows of long pines down trackless slopes,
the shadows of glass-faced towers down evening streets
the shadow of a frail plant on a city sill —
the net rising soundless at night, the birds' cries soundless, until
there was no longer dusk, or season, decline, or weather,
only this passage of phantasmal light
that not the narrowest shadow dared to sever.

. . .

it was the light
that you will see at evening on the side of a hill
in yellow October, and no one hearing knew
what change had brought into the raven's cawing
the killdeer's screech, the ember-circling chough
such an immense, soundless, and high concern
for the fields and cities where the birds belong,
except it was their seasonal passing, Love,
made seasonless, . . .
and higher they lifted the net with soundless voices
above all change, betrayals of falling suns,
and this season lasted one moment, like the pause
between dusk and darkness, between fury and peace,
but, for such as our earth is now, it lasted long.

(ll. 1-37)

In such poems, language both *is* and serves experience. And Walcott, far from being its prisoner, is in perfect attunement with it.

1. Walcott left Trinidad in 1981 to take up an appointment in Creative Writing at the University of Boston.
2. Michael Gilkes, review of *Midsummer*, *Caribbean Contact* Vol. 12, No 10 (March 1985), p. 15.
3. Terry Eagleton, review of *Midsummer*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 November 1984, p. 1290.
4. Walcott spends the summer months in the Caribbean each year.
5. Comment made in a portrait of the writer televised as part of a series entitled 'Literary Portraits'. Trinidad and Tobago Television aired the series 1-22 May 1985.

AVIS G. MCDONALD

The Crisis of the Absurd in Orlando Patterson's *An Absence of Ruins*

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus states: 'In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home country or the hope of a promised land.'¹ Orlando Patterson, in a sociological monograph, describes 'the modern crisis' as 'the problem of exile, alienation, rootlessness, being and identity'.² Patterson's fictional works, as well as his non-fictional studies in sociology and social philosophy, are explicitly and heavily indebted to the writings of Camus and Sartre.³ Indeed, he finds in Existentialism the deepest analysis of the 'modern crisis' or, as he also terms it, the 'exilic crisis'.

In the post-modernist, post-Sartrean, post-existentialist world of the 1980s, Sartre and Camus can be seen as representative figures of a dated ideology.⁴ But the fact that the Existentialist Absurd seemed for a time to

capture the post-modern crisis of alienation and powerlessness, remains a key to the understanding of Patterson's fictional account of a post-colonial society.

Obvious references to Camus' philosophical essay are recorded in the title of, and one of the epigraphs to, Orlando Patterson's first novel, *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964).⁵ This work depicts characters trapped in poverty in a 'shanty town' in Kingston. Dinah, a prostitute with 'ambition', tries to escape to a better life that will give her existence meaning, dignity, and a sense of belonging. However, her journey through the higher strata of the society is a journey into successive disillusionments. The Rastafarians wait in hope of a ship that never comes to take them out of their exile in the Babylon of established Jamaican society, to Ethiopia which is the Zion of their faith. Their condition is, at the same time, the dispossession and powerlessness of one segment of a post-colonial society, the 'exile, alienation, rootlessness' that constitutes the 'modern crisis', and the Existential Absurdity of the human condition.

Patterson's third published novel, *Die the Long Way* (1972),⁶ is a study of exile and bondage in its ultimate form: the total slave society of eighteenth-century Jamaica. The narrative develops a dialectic of bondage and freedom, submission and rebellion, degradation and dignity, again within an unmistakably Existentialist framework.

Whereas these two works give an account equally of the suffering of individuals and of the social conditions in which they are trapped, in Patterson's second novel, *An Absence of Ruins*,⁷ the balance is shifted. Here, the central concern is with a crisis in the psyche of the protagonist, Alexander Blackman, for which external events supply little more than an objective correlative. The novel can be read as a rather self-indulgent fantasy written primarily to work through an author's own problems of identity and direction and could be regarded as the least successful of Patterson's three novels. It is, however, not without interest as a philosophical exploration. My discussion will first treat Blackman's 'exilic crisis' and his quest for identity, meaning and direction in the Jamaican society to which he has returned from the metropolis. It will then be appropriate to compare briefly the treatment of the Absurd condition in Patterson's text with Sartre's and Camus' treatment of it.

Blackman's given name suggests a link to the conqueror of the ancient world. His surname speaks for itself. Formerly a Rhodes scholar, sociologist, university lecturer and a socially and politically active man, Blackman is portrayed at the beginning of the narrative as having given up all academic, social and political activity. He cannot commit himself to those pursuits, or to love, or indeed to anything. Yet he cannot in fact

manage to live a detached, uninvolved life. Suffering this ambivalence, he wanders restlessly around Kingston looking vainly for signs and symbols of meaning for his existence. Feeling trapped in an alien world, he longs for either a sense of belonging or for escape. Losing all hope, he attempts suicide but, unable to carry it out, he turns it into a fake suicide. The newspaper report of his 'death' leads to the actual death of his distressed mother and Blackman guiltily exiles himself in London.

Epigraphs in the text allude to problems of identity, exile and captivity and to the significance of history. The initial epigraph is a quotation from West Indian poet, Derek Walcott's 'The Royal Palms':

Here there are no heroic palaces
Nettled in sea-green vines or built
On maize savannahs the cat-thighed, stony faces
Of Egypt's cradle, easily unriddled;
If art is where the greatest ruins are,
Our art is in those ruins we became,
You will not find in these green, desert places
One stone that found us worthy of its name,
Nor how, lacking the skill to beat things over flame
We peopled archipelagoes by one star.

The epigraph interprets the title of the novel and indicates the concern of the text with the search for identity and direction specifically in a West Indian setting and in a post-colonial period.

Significant epigraphs also precede each of the four divisions of the novel. Part I, 'Consider the Beast', is preceded by an epigraph from Nietzsche: *The Use and Abuse of History*:

The beast lives unhistorically; for it 'goes into' the present, like a number, without leaving any curious remainder. It cannot dissimulate, it conceals nothing; at every moment it seems what it actually is, and thus can be nothing that is not honest. But man is always resisting the great and continually increasing weight of the past...

Blackman appears to be seeking to live his life in the present, like Nietzsche's conception of the beast. Trying to detach himself from commitment to his wife, Pauline, and to his friends and their political activism, he enters into an affair with Carmen, mistress of one of his friends, believing that there he can remain uncommitted. According to Blackman's diary which provides the narration at the beginning of Part I, he, much unlike a beast, is unable to experience either desire or the satisfaction of desire.

The title of Part II, 'Enter the Noble Coward', is based on its epigraph from *Pericles*:

I do shame
To think of what a noble strain you are,
And of how coward a spirit

Pericles, IV, iii.

This section of the narrative describes a series of events leading Blackman to an attempted suicide which quickly transforms itself into a pretence. To justify this, he explicitly invents for himself the role of the noble coward 'who refuses to be held responsible' (p. 127), a 'necessary recess from the too noble, too demanding, too lonely task of being totally responsible for himself' (p. 128). Part II begins with an unrealistically articulate confession from Pauline of her own cowardice in using Blackman as a shield against the world, and of her 'nakedness' without him, and of her wish to run away. From this point Blackman moves through a series of experiences to the decision to take his own life. First, a hurricane threatens and is averted; he senses in the crowd a 'delirious expectancy of ruin' (p. 89) and a regret of being condemned to the 'absence of all danger' (p. 91). Then, going to swim at a deserted beach, he experiences himself as a thing trapped at the centre of a closed universe whirling about him. The next day, walking the streets of Kingston, he wishes to find the ruins of an ancient culture around him, and tries to reject the story that beneath him lie the bones of tortured black slaves and murdered Arawak Indians. He meditates upon his real yet compelling links with English culture. He runs to his mother, intending to make her yield up to him a knowledge of his past, to sing him songs and tell him stories as a 'replanting of roots' (p. 113) but she misunderstands the reunion and he cannot tell her of his 'mad urge to make his past meaningful' (p. 117). Reaching a dead end in his diary he goes to the sea to drown himself. Quickly discovering that he loves life too much, he invents the role of noble coward and seeks 'the pleasures of suicide without suffering the un-human price of it' (p. 128).

The epigraph of Part III, 'Exit, the Second Adam', is an extract from Milton's account of original sin:

Ah, why should all Mankind,
For one man's fault, thus guiltless be condemned?
If guiltless!...

All my evasions vain
And reasonings, though through mazes, lead me still
But to my own conviction: first and last
On me, me only, as the source and spring
Of all corruption, all the blame lights due.

(Milton: *Paradise Lost*, Bk. 10)

The false report of Blackman's suicide causes the death of his mother by coronary thrombosis. Blackman (echoing Pauline's account, earlier) finds himself nakedly revealed as 'impotent, cowardly, abandoned and incongruous' (p. 155). He wishes to hide from the judgment of life, which has found him worthless. What previously was a sense of the meaninglessness and worthlessness of life, has become a sense of his own sin.

Part IV, 'The Epilogue', takes its epigraph from Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*:

It was not only that I could not become spiteful, I did not know how to become anything: neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect. Now, I am living out my life in my corner, taunting myself with the spiteful and useless consolation that an intelligent man cannot become anything seriously, and it is only the fool who becomes anything.

This section consists of a brief encounter between an inquisitor and Blackman who is hiding in London and, at times, yes, in the Underground. We are left with the picture of Blackman forever hiding himself from judgment.

The function of the alternating narrative voices — the third-person narrative account of Blackman and the account he gives of himself through his diary — is not the most obvious one. The third-person point of view might seem appropriate for the exterior account of Blackman's actions and the diary for an account of his innermost thoughts and feelings. However, Blackman's thoughts are conveyed as effectively by passages in the third-person narrative voice as by the diary's first-person account. With the exception of one entry (pp. 119, 123), the diary is as much concerned with his actions and experiences as are the segments in the third-person narration. The changes in narrative voice are not accompanied by changes in narrative distance or perspective.

An examination of the sudden transitions from diary entries to third-person narrative voice yields an explanation of the narrative structure. In the first transition Blackman's writing is interrupted by his mother (p. 24) and the last entry in the diary, his recollection of an abortive encounter with a prostitute, carries over into a dream state in which he has an encounter with the copulative notion of the waves of the sea, culminating in a seminal emission.⁸ In the second transition — from the longest section of the novel in diary form — his reflections on his past lead him to close the diary in mid-sentence to go to talk with his mother about his childhood (p. 122). The third transition occurs at the end of a long philosophical exploration in Blackman's diary, in which he tries to make an abstract Sartrean summation on the predicament of his being.

The cogency of his summation sends him rushing out to kill himself (p. 123). Only the last transition takes place formally at the end of a chapter and indeed at the end of Part IV; that is, at the end of all except the brief epilogue. At this point, Blackman has determined to close the diary forever, and to go into exile (p. 155). Clearly, each diary segment acts as a spring to the action following it. That action is narrated in the third person. Further, each of the four transitions is an important element in the novel, the last three being turning points for Blackman.

Everything else in the text leads us back to Blackman's central preoccupation with himself: with his identity, with his life's meaning or lack of it; with his direction or lack of it; with his attempts at detachment and eventually with the act of cowardice that convicts him of sin and sends him into an exile that can be seen as a kind of psychological suicide. In short, at the heart of the novel is Blackman's crisis of the Absurd. The symptoms of his crisis appear at several levels: at the level of action and inaction, the level of dream, and the level of thought.

At the level of action, Blackman is described as physically unable to consummate at one time the desire for beer and at another the desire for sex. He is presented initially as having given up his interest in all intellectual activity. He avoids commitment; yet he cannot be detached and uninvolved. This is exemplified in his fruitless search for signs and symbols; in the end of his affair with Carmen; and in his restless wanderings. Finally it reveals itself in his sole consequential action — the abortive suicide attempt — and in his final exile.

In his diary entry at the beginning of the novel, Blackman describes himself as finding security in the barrenness of the parched earth and feeling a familiarity with, and a tenderness towards, the 'harsh, brown, dusty aridity' to the extent of wanting to wallow in it:

Vacantly, I stared down at the roots of the tree. It had been a dry, harsh August.... The earth was parched and cracked.... It was with difficulty that I prevented myself from falling to the ground and wallowing all over in it. Little dry lot of land hemmed in by thorny hedges, I thought to myself with tenderness. (p. 13)

Blackman turns away from the strong, secure roots of the mango tree to find his affinity with the barren, rootless earth. Thus the reader is offered an image that recalls 'The Waste Land': 'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?'⁹ Here, Blackman is caught in the crisis of the Absurd. He seeks to escape the severe aridity of the earth which is matched by the horrifying, stark, clear blue sky; the all-enclosing sense of barrenness he loves and hates at once. Since the barren earth is undemanding, and since he sees no sense of purpose in its

merely being there supporting little if any growth, he seeks escape from it.

It becomes clear that Blackman is able to relish a relationship with Carmen, with Elaine, an English girl in his past, and with Pauline, his wife, only when there is 'no expectancy, no hope, no possibility of non-fulfilment' (p. 76). Just as he found a security in the undemanding earth with which there could be no involvement, so he finds security in being detached, apart, separate.

Blackman's crisis of the Absurd is conveyed also at the level of what may conveniently be called 'dream'. His frustrated desires for beer and for the prostitute come together in a dream in which he floats on copulative waves whose foam tastes of beer. The often-recurring dream in which he finds himself at the top of a spiral staircase, afraid to step across the abyss that opens between him and a room which strangers going before him enter with easy stride, is recognizable as an archetypal existentialist nightmare. In a strange, dreamlike episode on the beach at Green Bay, he experiences a panic dread, as all things in nature — sky, sand and sea — seem to flow into each other forming a vast but narrowing circle at the centre of which he becomes a trapped thing. He is intensely alone at the centre of an alien and imprisoning universe.

At the level of thought, the text portrays Blackman — through his diary, and through dialogue with friends and lovers — as treading an eternal round of self-examination and caught between guilt and self-justification. He offers paradoxes that have the air of excuses as he faces his lack of identity, lack of roots, lack of commitment, lack of direction, and lack of meaning. Both Pauline and Blackman's committed friends suggest that he accept his identity as a Jamaican. He can identify himself with the crowd on Windward Road, for 'they were painted with the dazed subdued astonishment of the lost' (p. 18). Similarly, he shares the crowd's desire for the forecast hurricane to come and bring destruction.¹⁰ But he cannot identify with his friends' belief in political action, or with what he describes as the 'self-imposed ignorance ... of our soddy bourgeoisie' (p. 41).

In his imagination, Blackman tries to create a fantastic past:

I felt I was thrown back in time, walking alone on the streets of the relic of some ancient city.... What ancient civilisation flourished here long, long ago?... How great and ingenious they must have been to create a mosaic of streets such as these. And in the same grid patterns as the Romans, too.... There is a past here.... My city goes back a thousand years. If you dig deep you will find the relics of even more ancient times. (p. 104)

But the reality around him, the ugly, barren city, the poverty and squalid conditions are illuminated by the rising sun, and his fantastic ancient city of historical ruins and elaborate drainage system is replaced by filthy gutters and peasant houses made from 'the sides of empty cod-fish barrels' (p. 104). Rejecting the evidence around him, Blackman makes a proposition:

For it is not possible ... that all there ever was are the harsh sounds of the cracking of cartwhips, the vile curses of cruel, inhuman masters, the rhythm of steel hoes plunging into unyielding, virgin soil. And what they have done to my great immortal works of art?... I shall not believe them. One day I shall destroy those ... shelves of lies ... I, Alexander Blackman, shall redeem the truth of my heritage, of my great past, that lies hidden somewhere. (p. 105)

Preferring the peace that fantasy offers him he rejects the reality that sunrise reveals. The alternatives are to accept the facts and live with them, or escape if he can. But neither the sea nor a long white ship, promise of escape, now holds hope for him: the sea appears glacier-like and motionless (p. 106). Similarly, the alley into which he turns to spare himself the agony of facing reality presents him with a dead-end. Here he is trapped in a dilemma, and again finds an abyss stretching between wish and fulfilment.

Re-examining his relationship with British culture as represented for him by the formal laws of cricket, the 'William' stories of Richmal Crompton and the English songs of 'maidens and fair shepherdesses, of rolling hills and plains' (p. 111), he notes that in order to love them, 'meaning had to be deprived of all substance' (p. 111). If Blackman rejects his British heritage, he rejects his African heritage as well when he asks: 'What have Ashanti warriors with their golden stool and ceremonies and God knows what, got to do with me...?' (p. 122). But his ambivalence about this, his nostalgic attachment to Jamaica, his undeniable roots in England and in Africa, are also made clear.

Fundamental to Blackman's lack of identity, commitment and direction, is the lack of any meaning to his world. The text places his main philosophic statement, in the form of a diary entry, just before his suicide attempt. His crucial philosophical assertion is a Sartrean essay on being-for-itself, apart from the fact that it plays elementary paradoxical tricks with logic, as in: 'I am conscious ... of thought, so I do not think. Of consciousness, so I can hardly be said to be conscious' (p. 121). However, Blackman writes:

My awareness comes upon me as something having past, an ever-passing presence, always an agonizing step behind something else. I was. I wanted to be. To be anything — them next door, that wall, even. Yet my every effort wanting to be only throws me upon the thing I am, the active recollection which evades me: only intensified the immediate past that I was; only makes me more aware of the self that I am always losing [sic] ... Something in me, something compelling, forces me to bridge the gap, to justify the separation of this thing which can only recollect, from everything else. (p. 121)

Blackman briefly examines and as quickly rejects race, society, history, culture, and his very birth as explanations for his existence. In doing so he declares: 'I come before race, I come before culture, I come before parents, I come before God' (p. 122). This is a fair dramatic translation of Sartre's assertion that being is prior to essence. Further, when Blackman declares that 'All I know is that I was, that I am ever passing, that I am always on the point of catching up with myself, the thing that lives, the moment now. But always it seems too late. Always I keep yearning to be what I am, but never was' (p. 123), he might be offering a definition of Sartre's concept of being-for-itself. The paradoxes that the text gives Blackman to utter do not bear close examination, but the general intent is clear.

Impelled by the logic of his argument, and unable to accept his being without explanations, without past or future, without meaning, Blackman seeks to terminate it by plunging into the sea, for 'some decision had to be made, some final plunge taken' (p. 123). On discovering that he lacks the courage for suicide, he quickly rationalizes his failure with the paradoxical conception of the noble coward, which 'implied the courage of refusing death as the solution to anything' (p. 127), and which allows him to be base; he says 'for him it was an essential part of being human' (p. 127). His theory also allows him to feign a suicide 'to make them all suffer' and 'make them all responsible' (p. 128). He succeeds in investing his prank with a high moral purpose, until the news comes of his mother's heart attack. Her death is given the appearance of a dramatic turning point in his understanding of himself. At this point in the narrative Blackman stands convicted of sin; but the sin of which he is guilty, again paradoxically, is that of not having experienced genuine guilt. He faces a crisis of the Absurd, considers suicide, commits instead a mischief, in the legal sense of the word, and consequently finds himself a second sinful Adam: he is hiding 'underground', in the anonymity of the London crowd, from the accusing eyes of life; that is, of God.

Blackman's crisis is riddled with paradox and contradiction. In his primal experience of the Absurd, at Green Bay, he feels trapped by the sea and sky — the least confining elements in nature. He experiences a loss of connection between desire and fulfilment, yet still has a desire for desire and for fulfilment. He lacks commitment, yet cannot achieve a detached life. He desperately searches for a sense of purpose, but convinces himself that there can be no purpose. Most particularly, his crisis is one of rootlessness. A Rastafarian in the market place points to an aspect of Blackman's predicament when he tells him: 'We are all Jews lost in the wilderness, brother, and we are all black men, according to the Word. And the Word, which is the Truth, say unto I: In this world, in this life, every man is a Jew searching for his Zion; every man is a black man lost in a white world of grief' (p. 96). This is recognizable as a metaphor for the 'modern crisis' which Patterson identifies with the 'exilic crisis'.

When Blackman later concludes that 'I come before race, I come before culture, I come before parents, I come before God', it is the force of this conclusion that leads him to attempt suicide. In his final exile in London, this phrase is echoed with a significant change, to 'standing as I do outside of race, outside of culture, outside of history...' (p. 60). Paradoxically, Blackman is, in the end, identified by his guilt, identified by his exile which is his penance, and identified by the fact that he 'stands outside of' those things that earlier in terms of his declaration that he came before them, could not define him. The ultimate paradox is that the guilty exile in the epilogue is described as 'a being deprived of essence' (p. 159).

The liberally sprinkled epigraphs and allusions through *An Absence of Ruins* encourage a hunt for sources and parallels. The epigraphs and the way in which they indicate the title and the structure of the novel have already been discussed. Blackman's 'lectures' on being-for-itself versus being-in-itself, and on the assertion that being is logically prior to essence are direct borrowings from Sartre's philosophy. Correspondingly, Blackman's affinity to Roquentin in Sartre's novel, *Nausea*,¹¹ is quite clear. It is not necessary to identify Blackman's mango tree roots with Roquentin's chestnut tree roots except, perhaps, as a deliberate mark of respect from the author to Sartre. The two trees are given quite different meanings. But Blackman and Roquentin are both unable to live with their experience of meaninglessness. Both suffer the nausea of contingent being. Roquentin escapes, through his project of writing a book, but in fact the escape, unlike the rest of the novel, is unconvincing. Hence, if Blackman

does not escape, in the sense of resolving his 'modern crisis', this is not a difference of great importance.

Whereas *The Children of Sisyphus* acknowledges an explicit debt to Camus, *An Absence of Ruins* does not. However, there is a parallel, though tenuous, between Blackman and Meursault of Camus' *The Outsider*.¹² Like Meursault, Blackman stands outside the conventions of society as he faces and responds to the meaninglessness of his life. But how very differently he responds. On the most likely reading of Meursault, he lives a life in the present without appeal, content to multiply experiences. He is interpretable as a type of pagan innocent reconciled to the sun and the sea of his Algeria, if not cosily at home in them. For Camus' Absurd man is aware that his world is incorrigibly alien; yet he accepts his relationship with it and makes it as satisfying as he can. Blackman is unable to put his detachment into practice, to go into the present without remainder, like a beast. His experiences are fraught with guilt, fear and impotence. He is no innocent of any type, and nature drives him into panic dread. At no point does he achieve acceptance of the Absurd, of 'exile without remedy' in a world 'divested of illusions and lights'.

A more modest parallel, again with notable differences, suggests itself in the relationships of these protagonists to their mothers. Meursault is executed, it is strongly suggested, because he did not cry at his mother's funeral, rather than because he murdered an Arab. Blackman's ultimate self-exile stems from his mother's death, and his consequent guilt. He lives unhappily in a meaningless world and, contrary to Camus' doctrine, concludes that suicide is a logical outcome of the meaninglessness of the world and of himself.¹³ Seemingly, only cowardice keeps him alive and it is guilt and a sense of worthlessness such as would be meaningless to Meursault that drives him to hide in the anonymity of an alien crowd.

Another parallel suggests itself in Camus' novel, *The Fall*.¹⁴ In the brief reply to the inquisitive London stranger given in the epilogue of *An Absence of Ruins*, Blackman irresistibly suggests the figure of Clamence, the judge-penitent who, out of guilt, is self-exiled from Paris, his home, to the seedy bars of Amsterdam. His guilt is not only over the woman he failed to save from drowning in the Seine, but for the pharisaic hypocrisy of his former successful life. And this parallel does seem a useful guide to the reading of *An Absence of Ruins*. It is not irrelevant that some critics have seen in *The Fall* a movement by Camus towards a theological position. If *The Fall* contains Jean-Baptiste Clamence — John the Baptist *clamans in deserto* — surely Camus' next novel, had he lived, must have

contained a Christ-figure. Or so it has been argued. *An Absence of Ruins* is certainly closer to *The Fall* than to *The Outsider*, in that its text, which constitutes an examination of the 'modern crisis' of a character in a meaningless world, ends as a recognizably theological examination of guilt and penance.

NOTES

1. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (1955; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 13.
2. Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse* (New York: Stein & Day, 1977), p. 11.
3. Bridget Jones, in 'Some French Influences in the Fiction of Orlando Patterson', *Savacou* 11/12 (1975), 29, remarks: 'His [Patterson's] originality lay in looking for models outside the inherited British sources. Existentialist philosophy shares none of the complacency. It developed in Europe during a period of acute political crisis, and draws on the deep-seated self-questioning which a colonial readily recognizes. It moves from an experience of anguish to a call for human freedom which challenges all preconceived values, all absolutes and authorities.'
4. No attempt can be made here to allow for the complex nature of the contrasts between Sartre's and Camus' treatment of the Absurd and between the trajectories of their changing and developing thought. Germaine Bree, in *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment* (New York: Dell, 1972), gives an account of Sartre's movement into intellectual commitment to Marxism in its Leninist, even Stalinist form, contrasted with Camus' humanistic, democratic socialism. It is notable that Patterson's sociology and fiction, both of which draw a great deal from Sartre's Existentialism, draw little from his Marxism.
5. Orlando Patterson, *The Children of Sisyphus* (1964; Kingston: The Bolivar Press, 1971).
6. Orlando Patterson, *Die the Long Day* (New York: William Morrow, 1972).
7. Orlando Patterson, *An Absence of Ruins* (London: Hutchinson, 1967). All subsequent page references are to this edition.
8. The interruption is so severe that Alexander Blackman finds himself called 'Richard' by his mother. Presumably, this is an error that would be corrected in a further edition.
9. In T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 63.
10. See V.S. Naipaul, 'A Flag on the Island' in *A Flag on the Island* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) in which the islanders welcome a threatening hurricane: 'The world was ending and the cries that greeted the end were cries of joy' (p. 211). When the hurricane passes without destruction the people are disappointed to have to resume their 'life that had not been arrested' (p. 213).
11. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).
12. Albert Camus, *The Outsider* (1942; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).
13. Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 54, exploring the idea of Absurd existence, concludes that revolt against the Absurd consists in continuing to live, not in suicide.
14. Albert Camus, *The Fall* (1956; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

Seeing With Other Eyes: Reflections on Christian Proselytization in Indo- Caribbean Fiction

There is a marked contrast between historical and sociological constructs of the religious experience of Indians in the Caribbean and its portrayal in fiction. The historical evidence is that whilst there have been major changes away from the cultural practices and world view that Hindus and Muslims brought with them as indentured labourers to the Caribbean, a majority of Indians in Trinidad and Guyana adhere in some way to the rites, beliefs and values of Hinduism and Islam. Even today, despite determined Christian proselytization and the material advantages which conversion offered in the past, less than twenty percent of Indians are Christians. Hindus and Muslims worry about the state of their religions and the Pundits and Mulvis complain about the increasing secularization of their flocks, but it is clear that being a Hindu or Muslim is central to many Indians' personal identity and to the survival of Indo-Caribbeans as a distinct cultural group. Though Indian attitudes to Christianity and converts are by no means uniform, in general they have tended to be relaxed. There was gratitude for the role of the Christian missions in championing Indian education in the past, though resentment and active opposition to aggressive attempts at conversion. Those Christian Indians who became socially prominent aroused a mixture of pride and envy, pity and contempt for 'abandoning' their own culture. In the past, popular Hinduism borrowed and absorbed elements of Christianity (just as Indian Presbyterianism became progressively rehinduised); in the present one senses a measure of ecumenical indifference.

However, almost without exception, the fictional portrayal of the practices and institutions of Hinduism (the experience of Muslim Indians

has scarcely been touched on) in Indo-Caribbean fiction has been rebarbatively negative. Rites have become meaningless, pundits are invariably venal and ignorant and, in the Caribbean, the world view of Hinduism has become absurd. The consequences of separation from India form one of the explanatory frameworks in novels which explore the breakdown of a whole Hindu world, but in this article I argue that one finds in the work of several Indo-Caribbean novelists the view, both implicitly and explicitly expressed, that it was the contact with the Christian world-view, through missionary proselytization, which destroyed the wholeness of the Hindu world and the psychic integrity of the individuals within it.

Superficially, the treatment of contact with Christianity and of Christian converts in Indo-Caribbean writing reflects wider social attitudes. It has focussed on popular stereotypes and has generally been satirical in presenting the convert as motivated by material self-interest, though several works reflect the more sympathetic popular view that the Christian convert is to be pitied.

The dominant stereotype has been the Christian Indian schoolmaster, with the middle class woman who mimics European standards of 'immodesty' in a supporting role. Thus in V.S. Naipaul's *A House For Mr Biswas* there is Shekar's wife Dorothy, 'lewd and absurd' in her short frocks pretentiously speaking Spanish in front of her stalwartly Hindu sisters-in-law, or Doreen James in Shiva Naipaul's *Fireflies* who has travelled so far from the origins that her eyes shine with 'anthropological fervour' when she enters an Indian peasant's hut.

The figure of the Christian Indian schoolmaster first surfaces in Seepersad Naipaul's novella 'The Adventures of Gurudeva' in the character of Mr Sohun, and is continued in Mr Lal in *A House For Mr Biswas*, Harricharan Narine's Mr Lalla in *Day's Gone By* (1976) and in Shiva Naipaul's Mr Mallingham in *A Hot Country* (1983). The dominant elements of the stereotype are low-caste, a delight in flogging the heathen Hindu child, a hypocritical moral probity and an exaggerated adherence to the Protestant work ethic. Even Seepersad Naipaul's portrayal of Mr Sohun, sympathetic in comparison to other treatments, is significantly ambivalent. On the surface the character of Mr Sohun exists as a mouthpiece for the author's criticism of the ignorance and caste bigotry of some of the Sanatanist pundits who were trying to revive the authority of traditional brahminical Hinduism. However, the treatment of the issue suggests other motivations. For instance, whilst the overt point of the contrast the story makes between the willingness of the 'chamar' Christian teacher of the previous generation to abase himself to

his Brahmin pupils and Mr Sohun's vigorous attack on caste distinctions is that times have changed and that caste is now irrelevant, the fact that both teachers *are* low-caste fits into a Hindu stereotype of the Christian convert. Moreover, the way that Sohun lectures Gurudeva, his former pupil, now a self-professed pundit, at considerable length on the subject and superciliously makes fun of him, is rather too self-justificatory, as if Seepersad Naipaul felt that Sohun needs to reassure himself about his status: 'In the same way chamars are not sweepers — they are often school teachers; and so can be said to have changed places with Brahmins...' (p. 96).

In V.S. Naipaul's *A House For Mr Biswas*, there is a less sympathetic emphasis on the low-casteness of Mr Lal, another Presbyterian flogger, ignorant, in his dirty cuffs and sweat-stained jacket. The same stereotype of the flogger is to be found in Narine's *Day's Gone By* and Mr Mallingham in *A Hot Country* pursues a life of 'unremitting labour, of rigorous effort, narrowly directed towards the narrowest of ends' (p. 7).

The dimension of moral fervour tends to be portrayed as hypocritical or absurd. In V.S. Naipaul's 'A Christmas Story', discussed in more detail below, Randolph's high-minded cant overlays a career of self-seeking corruption, whilst Shiva Naipaul's Mr Mallingham, in a thoroughly clichéd scene, savagely beats his daughter whilst making her recite the Lord's Prayer. Even in Clyde Hosein's story, 'I'm a Presbyterian, Mr Kramer', which acknowledges the moral courage of Reginald Cornelius Hassan, ironises its moral basis. Hassan is shocked to discover that his boss, a white man, with a distinguished war record, whom Churchill once shook by the hand, is a brutal sexual harasser of the women in the office. Probity and absurdity are caught in Hassan's reproving phrase, 'I'm a Presbyterian, Mr Kramer, and I won't stand for this iniquity', but Hosein indicates that the moral rectitude is built on the false foundation of an undue respect for whiteness and a sense of shame in his own family's past as estate labourers.

The motivation of materialistic self-interest and cultural self-contempt, widely mocked in the popular Indian phrase, 'rice Christian', indeed, acknowledged in the work of two writers whose backgrounds are Christian. Clyde Hosein's story, 'Curtains', satirically portrays two characters competing to escape from the shame of their 'Indianness'. Verna Taslim, the Presbyterian school teacher's wife despises her Muslim neighbour, Mrs Sandarim, because she still wears orhni and sometimes goes barefoot. But then Mrs Sandarim out-mimics her neighbour, even down to preparing a Christmas dinner complete with ham. 'Aray, suar? What, pig?' Taslim asks incredulously. Sardarim's daughter, once Dolly, now

Mary, explains: 'Catholic better than Presbyterian.' In Dennis Mahabir's novel, *The Cutlass Is Not For Killing*, the main attraction of Christianity is presented as the opportunity to leave behind the despised life-style and culture of the rural Hindus: 'The Karmarkars had individual names and faces — their bodies were cared for with good food... The family was alert, intelligent and constantly warned of the narrowness of their own people' (p. 25). However, the novel suggests that this is gained at a price. Ben Karmarkar's 'spiritual loneliness' indicates some inner loss, whilst pride in status is mixed with an element of racial self-contempt: 'Hartley was not too proud of what his English friends saw of his people, and felt as if they regarded him, and a few like him, as the exception to the rule' (p. 96).

This note of regret over the Christian convert's loss is echoed in other novels and stories. For instance, in 'The Adventures of Gurudeva', Sohun delivers Gurudeva a long lecture on the finer points of Hindu theology, even though he knows that it will go clean over Gurudeva's head. Naipaul's point is that Sohun's conversion has cut him off spiritually and socially from a religion to which he is still attached: 'But Mr Sohun was talking more to himself than to Gurudeva. He had read widely on Indian philosophy and religion and must needs talk it out' (p. 96).

In V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967), the main focus is on the tragic estrangement suffered by the narrator's father after he has been taken up by a missionary and his wife and then abandoned when they leave the island. K.K. Singh concludes: 'It had all led to nothing, so far as my father was concerned... I used to get the feeling that my father was a man who had been cut off from his real country ... shipwrecked on the island and that over the years the hope of rescue had altogether faded' (p. 88). Thereafter, though Singh's father attempts to 'rediscover the glory and a way of looking at the world' (p. 126) by becoming Gurudeva the sanyasin, the purity of the rituals he tries to revive are sullied by their implication in racial politics of Isabella, and the whole enterprise ends in '...an ugly clearing, a disfiguring of the woods.... Such childishness was not what I had expected from Gurudeva' (pp. 176-177).

The same sense of losing one world without gaining another is echoed in Shiva Naipaul's *A Hot Country* (1983) in the portrayal of Mr Mallingham, who after his conversion becomes so ashamed of his past that he declares: 'I came out of darkness, out of blankness. I have no past' (p. 44). He too is a castaway for whom 'conversion', like a knife, had severed the umbilical cord' (p. 106). He has gained nothing in return. He tells his daughter, 'If there was no God there would be no reason for anything.

Life would be one big joke'; he has lost an inclusive Hindu sense of the sacredness of life itself and his Presbyterian exclusiveness leaves him only with a sense of futility.

Of course, these are perceptions of Presbyterianism, which in some measure bear witness to the peculiar mixture of unease and contempt and pity which many Hindus seem to have felt towards converts.

However, several of the works of fiction discussed in this article also show a keen awareness that the source of such Hindu feelings is Hindu defensiveness. For instance, though the characterisation of Sohun in 'The Adventures of Gurudeva', moves ambivalently between sympathy and irony, the fundamental point is that Sohun's perceptions of the backwardness and absurdity of the Hindu world have wounded it to the core. Similarly, though the portrait of the grubby Mr Lal in *A House For Mr Biswas* is notably unsympathetic, V.S. Naipaul does not conceal the fact that Mr Lal's arrogant perceptions of Hindus, as lacking the 'thoroughness, discipline and what he delighted to call stick-to-it-iveness' of the convert, are those of the wider society which in the end overwhelms the world of the Tulsis. In V.S. Naipaul's short story, 'Tell Me Who To Kill' (1971), the narrator tells how his father mocked his Christian brother, Stephen, 'behind his back for that name, but all of us are proud of Stephen and we well enjoy the little fame and respect he gave us in the village'. Naipaul very acutely seizes on the Hindu wish that the Christian convert will have paid some personal price for forsaking his ancestral religion. The narrator's father tells him that 'Stephen is not happy with his Christian wife, and that Stephen, because of his progressiveness, is full of worries' (p. 74). This is shown to be wishful thinking when the narrator admits, 'And if he have worries, they don't always show.' However, when Stephen's son 'gone foolish' in Montreal, the narrator's father 'feel he win' (p. 84). The wound created by the very existence of Stephen's respectable Christian family is shown by the way the narrator is forced to see his own mother through their scornful eyes, 'rubbing her dirty foot against her ankle, grin and pull up her veil over the top of her head, as though it is the only thing she have to do to make herself presentable' (pp. 76-77). For this the narrator must hate them, think of Stephen's wife as 'Miss Shameless Christian Short-Dress', think of them as the enemy: 'When you find out who your enemy is, you must kill him before he kill you' (p. 83).

This combination of reflected Hindu social attitudes and acute self-awareness of their source is displayed most powerfully in V.S. Naipaul's 'A Christmas Story'. On the surface, Randolph is very much the stereotype: hypocritical, a flogger of Hindus and profoundly Euro-centric in his

values. However, by a masterly use of first person narration, Naipaul plunges the reader into the psychological heart of Randolph's contradictions and equivocations.

His narrative takes the form of a 'frank' confession, which like most frank confessions, admits only to conceal. However, because Randolph is at least partially aware of the contradictions in his feelings, he becomes a moving figure. As a retired and impecunious head-teacher he has embezzled the funds of the new school whose building he is supervising. However, he only actually confesses to being 'repeatedly in error' in his calculations, of there being 'repeated shortages' and that 'To cover up one error I had to commit twenty acts of concealment'. Ironically invoking the intervention of a karmic fate, he carefully denies his responsibility for what occurs: 'I felt myself caught up in a curious inefficiency that seemed entirely beyond my control, something malignant, powered by forces hostile to myself' (p. 41). What Randolph has seen in Presbyterianism is the promise of material prosperity granted in return for prayers and faith. It is the failure of that 'promise' which provokes Randolph's fraud and he is swift to find within the ideological apparatus of his shallow faith a means of half-justifying what he has done. When the social advantages which Christians had had in the earliest days of his conversion begin to wane, and Randolph sees his ignorant Hindu cousin Hori prospering in his transport business, he admits 'my faith was undergoing its severest strain'. So often the phrase a 'nightly wrestling with God' signifies only that Randolph is quarrelling with God because he has failed to give him the prosperity and status he desires. He repeatedly talks of his 'zeal', but it is clear that it has two functions: to convince himself that he is right and to convince his superiors he is worthy of advancement. Righteousness in the eyes of God becomes confused with righteousness in the eyes of men. His motive for burning the school down is so that his shame, 'the pit of defilement', will not become known amongst the poor villagers he despises. And when the school does burn down at, we suspect, his wife's and son's hands, Randolph pretends to see divine intervention: 'And lo, there was a boy bearing tidings. And behold, towards the West the sky had reddened, the boy informed me that the school was ablaze. What could I do?' Naipaul then neatly underlines the 'niceness' of Randolph's conscience by having him report how he takes his family to the races on Boxing Day, but protesting 'We did not gamble. It is against our principles' (p. 46).

At a superficial level, then, 'A Christmas Story' satirises the Indian Presbyterians for pretending a superior code of probity and Western

pragmatism in contrast to the alleged fatalism and amorality of Hinduism. But the story says much more than this.

Firstly, the story penetrates to the heart of Randolph's shame by showing how he has learned to see Hinduism with European, Christian eyes: 'Hinduism, with its animistic rites, its idolatry, its emphasis on mango and banana leaf and — the truth was the truth — *cowdung*, was a religion little fitted for the modern world.' As a result, he becomes ashamed of his Hindu name, Choonilal, and delights in the 'rich historical associations' of his adopted name, and calls his own son Winston. He is 'pleased to say' that the Christian Indian women in their short frocks 'resembled their sisters who had come all the way from Canada' (p. 27).

However, Randolph's tragedy is also that the process of conversion is doomed to remain incomplete. Thus, although he says he has abandoned Hinduism because he sees it only as 'meaningless and shameful rites', what he most enjoys in Presbyterianism is its ritual: '...pleasure was given me by the stately and *clean* — there is no other word for it — rituals sanctioned by my new religion.'

And though Randolph is aware of how absurd he must have looked ('the picture of the over-zealous convert' (p. 28)) as dressed in his Sunday suit of white drill, he eats his beef with a knife and fork, and how all this might be seen as laying 'too great stress on the superficial', his rationalisation that for him 'the superficial has always symbolised the profound', fails to see that this is exactly the kind of defence a Hindu might make of having physical representations of the Gods, anathema to iconoclastic Presbyterians. Repeatedly, Randolph slips between awareness and unawareness of his buried attachments to Hinduism. For instance, just after his conversion he feels that eating with his fingers was now 'so repulsive to me, so ugly, so unhygienic, that I wonder how I managed to do it until my eighteenth year', though later he is able to admit that 'food never tasted as sweet as when eaten with the fingers' (p. 27). However, when his boorish cousin Hori comes to dispute with him, insisting that hands are more hygienic than knives and forks, Randolph unconsciously demonstrates how deep-seated his Hindu instincts are. To test him, Hori begins picking his teeth with one of Randolph's forks. Randolph confesses that after Hori leaves: 'I took the fork he had handled and bent it and stamped on it and then threw it out of the window' (p. 29). Afterwards he looks at the incident as one which shows how difficult it is to sustain a Christian attitude of mind when faced by ridicule; really the episode illustrates Randolph's Hindu instincts over pollution. Naipaul also ironically has Randolph express his one moment of grace, when he

decides to reveal his deceits, in terms which are characteristically Hindu. Thinking of an earlier moment of disappointment he concludes: 'And if I had the vision and the depth of faith which I now have, I might have seen even then how completely false are the things of the world, how much they flatter only to deceive' (p. 35).

In this story, then, there are a number of different voices to be heard. There is a defensive Hindu satire of Presbyterianism, there is a serious concern with what Naipaul clearly feels is a deficiency in its creed (that the notion of Divine grace permits an evasion of personal responsibility for the consequences of one's actions) but above all, what Naipaul shows in the story is that whilst Randolph's conversion has corrupted the wholeness of his former way of looking at the world, the residual elements of Hinduism (all the more destructive for being unacknowledged) in his world view conspire to undermine and corrupt the new religion and culture he has adopted. The Christian Indian figure emerges in this story as a truly representative though specific instance of the experience of the community as a whole. Randolph is painfully caught between two mutually corrupting world visions, the experience which, of course, Naipaul describes as his own in *An Area Of Darkness* (1964).

The way in which the secession of even a minority of Christians from the Hindu fold and the contact with Christianity itself is felt to inflict a corrupting and mortal wound on Hinduism is most savagely and explicitly expressed in Harold Sonny Ladoo's *Yesterdays*. Ladoo himself came from an Indian Christian background, though untypically an impoverished rural one, though one can only speculate on the biography which underlies his nihilistic vision. In some respects *Yesterdays* echoes V.S. Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* in expressing the view that attempts to 'revive' Hinduism in the Caribbean are anachronistic and absurd. However, Ladoo roots the reason for this very explicitly in the consequences of Christian contact. Poonwa plans to go on a reverse proselytizing mission to Canada, but his motives are fraudulent and corrupt. He wants to escape from Karan settlement to the comforts of Canada, excited by the stories he has heard about the sexual degeneracy of American women, but above all Poonwa's mission is corrupted by his desire to revenge the humiliations he suffered at the hands of the Canadian Missions, particularly the sadistic blonde Canadian teacher who, 'full of apostolic conviction', has used her teaching job as a 'platform to wage war against the heathen children' and in particular Poonwa whom she has beaten with piano wire. Poonwa rails against the Canadian Missions for teaching 'Indians how to worship at the values of the white world.... They are mimics.' However, he himself has been so

thoroughly infected by the experience that he has not only become thoroughly Indo-Saxon (he tells his father, 'men like you, father, shouldn't be allowed to live in the British Empire' (p. 85)) but obsessed with the Christian world. He is a frustrated virgin whose sexual activity consists of keeping a 'philosophical' diary full of juvenile anti-Christian dirty-talk:

Question.... Name one miracle

Ans.... Mary was still a virgin after Jesus passed through her legs (p. 43)

He plans to build five torture chambers in his reverse missionary school in Canada in which to flog his converts, make them wear Hindu garments and 'teach them that white is ugly and evil; only black and brown are good' (p. 106). He plans to 'teach the white world compassion. They have lost it.' Ladoo's satire is, of course, double-edged, set against both the original missionaries and the pretensions of the Hindus to lead a religious revival. The point is that Poonwa and the Hinduism he represents has not only become degenerate through separation, but it has been so deeply wounded by the Christian contact that its 'revival' can only be an absurd act of inverted mimicry. Poonwa's only real act of revolt is to agree to 'bull' Sook, the village homosexual, in the Church, 'as an opportunity to get even with the Christian blonde and the blue-eyed Jew' (p. 107). Although Ladoo's novel is set in 1955, it is clear that he is alluding in it to the 'cultural revival' which was going on in the late 1960s and 1970s, based around Indian student groups at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad. Poonwa's speech on his mission could have come out of one of those campus journals:

Christianity broke the spirit of the Indians and the spirit of the Negroes as well. Today on this island the young Indian boys are drinking rum and fighting and killing each other.... There is a reason for this. They have no culture. They are lost! ... Indian culture had not been completely broken by the Indenture System. Today the Indians, instead of making it their cultural heritage, they are ridiculing it, and making a mockery of it. Soon they will become a people without an identity.

Although by the 1960s, Indian Presbyterianism was no longer the force it had been, and both Hindu and Muslim communities had achieved a considerable degree of institutional stability, there were new attempts to win converts made by a number of aggressively evangelical Christian sects.

The intolerant and culturally destructive style of such brands of Christianity is portrayed in Sharlowe Mohamed's *Requiem For A Village* (1982), a naively written tract which portrays the corrupting impact of a funda-

mentalist Christian mission on a mixed Indian village of Hindus, Muslims and Presbyterian Christians. The novel is written from a Presbyterian Indian point of view, so that its overt message is that such missions give Christianity a bad name, but its underlying theme is the way the mission divides Indian from Indian and from values and traditions still shared by the villagers irrespective of their faith. In his story, 'The Process of Living', Shiva Naipaul uses the experience of a young woman, Clara, who becomes the victim of a predatory Christian hunter of souls, as an image of what he feels is the psychic fate of Indians in the Caribbean. Horatio Reuben, 'Servant of the Lord', begins preying on Clara after her husband leaves her behind when he goes to America. His motive in pursuing Clara is to punish her husband who with irreligious rudeness had earlier thrust him from their yard. Reuben tries to destroy Clara's remaining affection for her husband, telling her that her source of suffering is attachment to 'a most ungodly man' (p. 119). After his sessions with her, Clara emerges debilitated as though Reuben has been 'siphoning off her vital juices into himself'. In bringing her 'comfort', Reuben teaches her a bitter knowledge which had 'given birth to bitterer despair' (p. 122). The analogy with the Indian experience as a whole is strongly suggested in the language of the following passage:

Roderick's return would intensify her sickness. It was not possible to re-embark on that voyage. That was asking too much. The ship was broken in two. But memory would not be stilled; and the renunciation that Reuben demanded ... was not possible either. That was also asking too much of her. The heavenly spaces were inhuman, terrifying. She would never be at home in them. (p. 122)

Clearly, in the novels and short stories discussed in this article the contact with Christianity is but a metonym for a much wider experience of cultural colonisation and the corruption of ancestral authenticity. But since it is a specific aspect of the process which takes place at the very heart of the individual's way of looking at the world, then perhaps it is not surprising that though in historical and sociological discourses the contact with Christianity appears as seemingly peripheral to the Indian community as a whole, in fiction the results of the contact are portrayed as deeply destructive.

1. See, for instance, Kusha Haraksingh, 'The Hindu Experience in Trinidad', paper presented at the Third Conference on East Indians in the Caribbean, 1984; J.C. Jha, 'The Hindu Sacraments (Rites de Passage) in Trinidad and Tobago', *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No 1, pp. 40-52; Morton Klass, *East Indians in Trinidad: A Study in Cultural Persistence* (New York, 1961); A. & J. Niehoff, *East Indians in the West Indies* (Milwaukee, 1960); Harry Ramnath, *The Unwritten Laws of Hinduism* (Trinidad, 1982).
2. See J. Harewood, *The Population Of Trinidad and Tobago* (Trinidad, 1975), pp. 107-111; Dwarka Nath, *A History Of Indians in Guyana* (London, 1970), p. 246.
3. See J.T. Harricharan, *The Work of the Christian Churches Among the East Indians in Trinidad During the Period of Indentureship 1845-1917* (Trinidad, 1975); Brinsley Samaroo, 'The Canadian Presbyterian Mission as an Agent of Change in Trinidad During the 19th and Early 20th Century', paper presented to the Fourth Conference of Caribbean Historians, U.W.I., St Augustine, 1972; Samaroo, 'Missionary Methods and Local Responses: The Canadian Presbyterians and the East Indians in The Caribbean', paper presented to the Second Conference on East Indians in the Caribbean, U.W.I., St Augustine, 1975; H. Sitahel, 'The Mission of the Church in Trinidad', unpublished Master's Thesis, McGill University.
4. Tensions tended to surface during periods of electoral conflict where Hindus and Indian Christians supported different political parties. See W. Mahabir, *In and Out of Politics* (Port of Spain, 1978).
5. See Dale Bisnauth, *A Short History Of The Guyana Presbyterian Church* (Guyana, 1979); and Jeremy Poynting, 'A Dumb God Buried in Your Grandfather's Copper Trunk: Indian Religious Sensibility in Indo-Guyanese Poetry', *Kyk-Over-Al*, Vol. 35, 1986.
6. I have argued elsewhere (in an as yet unpublished article, 'Ancestral Voices in the Indo-Caribbean Novel') that the Hindu world vision, which V.S. Naipaul and other Indo-Caribbean novelists have proclaimed dead, in fact maintains a stubborn after-life in their work.
7. Although Doreen James is never actually identified as Indian, itself a deliberate irony, it is clear from the response of the old peasant she and Ram visit that he mistakes her for a Khoja.
8. *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories* (London: Deutsch, 1976), pp. 25-123.
9. London: Deutsch, 1961; quotations from the Fontana edition.
10. San Fernando, 1976.
11. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983.
12. For a fuller discussion of the context of this story, see Poynting, 'A Proper Wonder At His Achievement: The Fiction of Seepersad Naipaul', *Toronto South Asian Review*, Vol. 4, No 1, 1985.
13. *A Flag On The Island* (London: Deutsch, 1967); quotations from the Penguin edition, pp. 24-46.
14. *The Killing Of Nelson John and Other Stories* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1980), pp. 42-51.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-80.
16. New York: Vantage Books, 1971.
17. London: Deutsch, 1967; quotations from the Penguin edition.
18. *In A Free State* (London: Deutsch, 1971), pp. 63-108.
19. Toronto: House of Anansi, 1974.

20. Groups such as the Society for the Propagation of Indian Culture whose statements can be found in journals such as *Embryo* and *Pelican*.
21. The activities of Christian fundamentalist groups considerably worried Indian cultural militants. See K. Ganessingh, 'Afro-Christians Lead the Attack on Indian Culture', *Mukdar*, Vol. 1, No 2, 1974, pp. 45-49.
22. Trinidad: Inprint Caribbean, 1982.
23. In *Winter's Tales* (Macmillan, 1974); in *Beyond The Dragon's Mouth* (London: Deutsch, 1985), pp. 96-126 as 'The Dolly House'.

Book Reviews

David Dabydeen, *Slave Song*. Mundelstrup, Denmark: Dangaroo Press, 1984. 72 pages. £3.95.

David Dabydeen's *Slave Song* consists of fourteen poems which have been minted from Guyanese folk-speech. The book carries a long introduction in which Dabydeen defines his approach to a history of exploitation and slavery that is the background to the verse he has written. There are useful, indeed essential, Notes and Translations.

'The language is angry, crude, energetic' (p. 13) but sustains, Dabydeen argues, a 'potentiality for literature [that] is very great indeed' (p. 15).

I must leave readers to judge the introduction for themselves. In this short review I shall confine myself to gauging, as it were, the quality and the tone of the verse.

The folk-poetry of the Caribbean is well known for its straight rhythm. It frequently relies upon devices such as the drum to gain or exhibit momentum or power. There is a radical difference in *Slave Song*. The rhythm is not committed to external props but to linguistic and internal emphases that help to deepen one's *visualisation* of the traumas of violence suffered by the characters in the poems.

Take the opening lines in the poem 'For Mala':

Yesterday deh pull out young girl from de river tangle —
Up in de net in de fish, bloat, bubbly bite —
Up, teet-mark in she troat and tigh:
Was na pirae.

The last line is carefully plotted and calculated to help us *see* a pathos and a terror beyond the net of natural disaster. The body in the tangle of the river has been raped by human devils not mangled by perai. Indeed the river of which the poem speaks is a coastal

river, associated with the sugar cane plantations, and therefore free of perai which one finds by and large in the deep interior rivers of Guyana.

Let us look at the 'translation into English' which the book offers: 'Yesterday they pulled out a young girl from the river, tangled/ Up in the nets among the fish, bloated, breasts bitten/ All over, teeth marks in her throat and thigh/ It wasn't piranha.'

The comparison is striking. One cannot fail to see, I think — when one scans both versions — what an evocative vehicle is the language of 'broken utterance', when carefully judged, for the half-light, half-shadow it sheds upon the psyche of the imagination. The abbreviated spirit in 'teet-mark in she troat and tigh' — the link between 'tigh' (tie) and 'net' — helps to give half-seen, half-hidden proportion to the catch from the river.

We are caught ourselves, therefore, in a tapestry of abbreviations or erosion of being that illumines the victim of rape.

The verse of the entire collection tends to fuse expectations then by abrupt truncation to re-focus or distribute these in a contradictory way. Undeniably such re-focusing reinforces the pathos and horror of the situation depicted in the poem. It is the concentration on detail nevertheless that gives an opening — a negative opening no doubt but saturated with longing — into a state of blinding emotion in which sorrow and joy are almost indistinguishable from each other. Not entirely indistinguishable. For through or within a negative crack or negative opening the poem implicitly, darkly, questions a submission to total fate or total fury. 'Elegy' is a fine example that needs to be read closely as the depiction of a truncated world that turns in upon itself and questions itself.

'Love Song' is another example, I think, of inner tragic bonds, inner tragic stasis — frustration and fantasy — enmeshing the White Woman (in capital letters) of the sugar estate and a peasant labourer. I am reminded of a short story by D.H. Lawrence depicting a Greek peasant and a wealthy American 'sun-goddess'. The therapy of the personal or collective unconscious Lawrence seeks to plumb through the elements is wholly absent in Dabydeen's 'Love Song', but a kind of self-abrasive hierarchy — if I may so put it — links the short story and the poem.

The poem hardens in its climax and obliterates all fantasy, or potential for tenderness, between 'goddess' and 'slave':

Moon-eye
Blue like blue-saki wing,
Silk *frack* tumble an splash on me face like *wata-fall*
(*italics mine*)

When those lines are measured against the entire context of the poem and within an emphasis on dismemberment ('cutlass slip and cut me cack') one perceives the stasis of longing that changes 'frock' into unrippling 'frack', and 'water' into 'wata-fall'.

I am inclined to think the translations are a necessary ingredient in the book and that one should scan the verse and its translation closely. They strengthen one's appreciation of a kind of internal sculpture in the poem that may be minted from altered vowel and consonant sounds in folk-speech. When these are visualised and converted in the poem they begin to move into a new dimension and to gain an edge that is sharp and vivid, uncompromising and fierce.

WILSON HARRIS

Baudelaire's saying that 'the universe is a vast storehouse of images ... which must be digested and transformed' sounds like an apt summing up of Wilson Harris's fiction. Since *Palace of the Peacock*, the transformation of images and of the vision they convey has infused the regeneration of imagination and creativity which, throughout his writing, is presented as a *sine qua non* for the salvation of humanity. His latest novel is a transfigured 'divine comedy of existence', a modern Dantesque allegory which confronts indigenous and metropolitan worlds to explore the possibilities of change in a violence-ridden universe. It opens in 1982 with the assassination in London of Everyman Masters by a mysterious stranger. This is a re-enactment of his 'first death' in 1957 in similar circumstances in New Forest, South America. He was then a plantation overseer and was stabbed by the husband of an exploited woman who mistook him for someone else. After the shock of his 'first death' Masters walked the night of the metropolitan world of which he had been an agent 'in a corrupt colony' (87). It initiated the inquiry into 'hallucinated layers of being' which is largely the subject of the novel, though it is only his 'second death' which triggers off the 'biography of spirit' which he has asked his friend Jonathan Weyl, the I-narrator, to write.

From then on, Virgil-like, Masters becomes Weyl's major guide 'into the Inferno and the Purgatory of the twentieth century world' (15) but also 'into realms that seemed to exist before birth and after death' (30). This would seem to suggest that the novel develops on two levels, one of which implies the abolition of time, as the 'drama of consciousness' within Harris's protagonists usually does. There is indeed a breaking apart of the time of narration (1982) into slices of time remembered, but it is associated with the free movement through the 'light years' of past, present and future. Similarly, the narrative combines the duality illustrated in *Palace of the Peacock* (its outer and inner exploration) with the many-layered perception of the visionary artist to be found in *Ascent to Omai*: the 'sketches-within-sketches' that arise here from Mr Delph's 'far viewing' (163). This structural design corresponds to a metaphorical one since, as they progress from the beach of New Forest to its cave-like plantation tenements, the characters perform the fourth mythical epigraph to the novel. The various *loci* they re-visit in New Forest in their labyrinthine journey are both real and symbolical, both when they explore landscapes of creative dream and imagination when returning to 'Waterfall Oracle' in the interior, and when Jonathan and his wife Amaryllis descend into the ocean to understand the wasted lives of people who drowned, while Amaryllis was saved.

The first part of the narrative deals mostly with Masters' childhood, youth and adult life in New Forest, while the second tends to concentrate on Martin Weyl, the narrator's father and a lawyer who was also a friend of Masters'. Together they offer a powerful evocation of what it was like to live in the South American colony in the first half of the century: the Inferno condition of the poor, the narrow, obtuse existence of the middle class from which nevertheless such visionary characters as the Australian teacher Delph, Judge Quabbas, Martin Weyl and old aunt Alice emerge. The narrative progresses through significant incidents or facts which at first seem to have little connection until one realizes that each is a variable, a pregnant instance, of a particular strand of the human experience the novel recreates. For example, the apparently anodine wound Masters, aged nine, receives from a knife-like bone on the beach echoes and expands through the novel as we are faced with the many wounds by which the characters have been 'sliced': the sufferings of the poor, Martin Weyl crushed to death, the dagger in Masters' side or the wound 'in the armour of a civilization'. Yet this wound is seen throughout as a poten-

tially 'transfigurative' one. Masters' adolescent cousin Thomas, who was looking after him, is first beset by doubt as he tries to 'prove' Masters' wound, then by fear and uncertainty when he realizes that he has lost his charge and rushes back to New Forest where he collides with a black woman and knocks down her basket of eggs, a minor catastrophe in itself but a major one in her infernal plantation existence. This too is the germ of a series of collisions not the least of which is the historical one which took place on the same ground between Europeans and Amerindians.

The characters' allegorical dimensions clearly serve to question the ideals by which we live. So Thomas's 'poignant and heartrendering Doubt' acts as a counterpoint to Faith which 'blocks our vision of the starving and the emaciated in every corner of the world' (59). Even Memory, always an essential element in Harris's reconstructions, is seen as both true and false and embodied in the mysterious stranger from whom Masters runs away on the beach (his later assassin?). Here, however, allegory uncovers unforeseen psychological depths and parallels in flesh-and-blood characters, and also a mysterious force, of which the hidden voice or hidden conscience, heard but equally ignored by Johnny, the Carnival Czar, and Masters in his youth, seems to be only one manifestation among many. Though each is an individual in his own right, no character is self-contained. Thomas is 'the cousinly shadow [Masters] trailed behind him in history' (60). Johnny is a poor counterpart to rich Masters since, in both, Memory has aroused 'the seed of Ambition to rule; to master a universe that had despoiled one' (26). Like Masters, Johnny is stabbed to death, though not out of revenge, but by the tormented love of Thomas for the much older woman he is seeking to protect. At the trial Martin Weyl dons Thomas's mask and his role, pointing the way to the true revolution Thomas had failed to achieve, while later Masters survives a heart attack thanks to Martin Weyl's heart. All the personae the narrator encounters in his Dantesque journey are 'character-masks', actors in the carnival play of history, conscripted within a given frame of existence which Weyl penetrates in order to understand the real nature of their motives and to reverse through creative imagination the consequences of their actions. So penetrating Thomas's mask in conjunction with Quabbas' (the elderly man in love with his young niece) reveals that in both their apparently abnormal love hid a profound desire 'to give, to save, and receive nothing in return' (85). At the climax of this reconstruction Jonathan also realizes that violence, apparently irreversible in a desperate world, can yield 'a subversive edge, that turns into the terror of pity, the terror of beauty, the terror of gentleness, to ravage our minds and purge us *through* violence *of* violence' (90). This is illustrated metaphorically when they witness a storm at sea, just as his mother's suffering makes Jonathan aware that 'the roots of hope lie *through* hopelessness that is sliced, transfigured, sliced and sliced again and again' (96), or later that abnormality, confessed to, is redressed *through* abnormality, that oblivion *resists* oblivion. What is being asserted here is the reversibility of evil.

Harris's readers have long been familiar with his conviction that the very sources of human tragedy paradoxically offer their own healing power and that the very biases that imprison mankind can be broken down into their opposite. Hence the duality which informs all aspects of his fiction; its situations, characters, style, and particularly its imagery. Masters and Jonathan struggle through a labyrinth of innocence and guilt, and their journey involves both regression and progression. When Thomas sees her through the bars of the Alms House to which she has been relegated, Aunt Alice dances at once 'the realm of oblivion' and 'the realm of Carnival evolution into a family of spirit'; in her limbo condition she is 'the catalyst of fame at the heart of families of non-existence' (42). Fire is shown to consume but also to fertilize; the wheel that crushes Martin to death is

also the wheel of revolution. 'The fact that creation broke into halves, namely, absolute bliss/absolute terror, love/hate, beauty/dread (or whatever Carnival dualities one perceived) was a manifestation of unbroken but untouchable wonder, intact but unstructured mystery' (162). Thus Carnival, which may be a dead ritual for Czar Johnny, recovers its full power of liberation. Essentially, it is a capacity to move in and out of masks, in and out of frames of existence, whatever these may be, which must be exposed as the 'masquerade' we cling to. Carnival 'hides us from ourselves, yet reveals us to ourselves' (86).

Since his very first novel Harris has attempted to approach a deeper or 'intact' reality, a mysterious truth or wholeness which he knows to be unattainable by living man or unfathomable, and which in *Palace of the Peacock* was evoked in the timeless homecoming of the crew to the invisible folk. Again and again he has shown that in ordinary life all human perceptions, creations, and attitudes are necessarily partial (at once part of a whole and biased) and has therefore denounced the monistic character of most ideals in art or in life. In *Carnival* this results in two major developments. One is the writing process as it is actualized and elaborated by Jonathan since fiction writing itself is for him an object of exploration and reflection. It amounts to a genuine dialogue, a process of mutual creation or 'double writing' for the narrator is himself created by the characters who guide him, yet is also their 'father-spirit' (31). Thus only Masters' guidance makes it possible for Jonathan to become the 'fiction-parent of generations steeped in the collision of worlds' (34). In *The Tree of the Sun* the painter DaSilva is also 'created' by the figures he paints. The other development is Harris's bold transmutation of the Dantesque allegory. His earlier explorations of an underworld (which all his novels are) were already paralleled by glimpses of Paradise though he has repeatedly warned against the notion of an absolute Paradise. In *Carnival* we progress from Inferno to Purgatory to Paradise but *at the same time* we are repeatedly aware that descent runs parallel with ascent, and from the start Masters envisions 'the primal gateway into the underworld and overworld of the cosmos' (22). The last chapter illustrates this remarkably. Jonathan and Amaryllis have just become united and in their intercourse have reached 'the strangest climax, reality of paradise' (123). Chapter eight presents *together* or in parallel the ecstasies they experience (we are reminded throughout that Amaryllis is in Jonathan's arms) and the torments Masters goes through in the London Inferno where he has emigrated with poorer West Indians. This last part also makes it clear that the 'savage heart' of pagan cultures, pagan rituals (first revealed in the Amerindian prince who killed his mother to put an end to her sufferings) can be turned into a saving element as when Martin Weyl's 'savage heart' enables Masters to live his second life. Paradise and Inferno are indissociable throughout the novel; each exists in the other and those who descend into the Inferno pay for the glimpses of Paradise Jonathan and Amaryllis have access to. By fusing his own versions of West Indian Carnival and Dantesque allegory Harris actualizes in his own narrative the marriage of cultures they achieve.

These incomplete comments cannot account for the experience of reading a novel by Harris, for the dense ramifications of the narrative texture cannot be pulled apart. The frustrated critic can only agree with a recent statement by George Steiner:

Where we read truly, where the experience is to be that of meaning, we do so as if the text (the piece of music, the work of art) incarnates (the notion is grounded in the sacramental) a real presence of significant being. This real presence, as in an icon ... is, finally, irreducible to any other formal articulation, to any analytic deconstruction or paraphrase. (*T.L.S.*, 8. November 1985)

HENA MAES-JELINEK

Cyril Dabydeen, *The Wizard Swami*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1985. 116 pp. Hardback Rs 80, flexiback Rs 50.

The Wizard Swami is an interesting example of Commonwealth literature, written in Canada, set in the Indian community in Guyana, and published in India. The novel was ready in manuscript form several years before the appearance of *Goatsong* and *Elephants Make Good Stepladders*, the collections of poetry which established Dabydeen's name in Canadian poetry; but it has been much longer in finding a publisher, perhaps because of its mixed Commonwealth nature, but also because it is difficult to find a publisher for a first novel.

The Wizard Swami is in several respects rather a long short story than a novel. It may start out like an *Entwicklungsroman* or picaresque novel: it depicts the young hero's problems at home, at school, and with the other children of the village, his learning period or apprenticeship, the meeting with the pandit (Hindu priest) who becomes a decisive influence on his dreams and plans, and his wanderings. However, in its concentration on Devan Chattergoon, who is the only person we get to know from the inside, its humorous one-sided view of the other characters, and the quick leaps to Devan's new life as a swami (Hindu school teacher) and trainer of horses, it is really more a long short story.

The setting in the first part is in villages on the Corentyne in Guyana; in the second part in Georgetown, the capital, but only the most necessary information about the localities is given. We hear about political and religious life in these places, but we see it with Devan's eyes, from the outside, and are not given any kind of socio-political insight into the structure of the country. This is not a realistic novel, but rather a mixture of fairy tale and satire. Devan's sudden development from a lazy schoolboy to a learned religious man, the leader of a school and trainer of the favourite horse of Mr Bhairam, candidate for the presidency of the All India League, is as surprising as the transformations of fairy-tale characters.

The other characters who are involved in the local power games are gradually revealed as competing members of mafia groups whose façade is a return to traditional Indian values represented by an ambitious school-building programme, but whose real interests are horse-racing and political power. Sarwan Singh, the leader of the one faction, emerges as a fairly realistic representative of the political machinations in a developing country, but Mr Bhairam, sitting at his harmonium, and the opportunistic pandit Gocolram, are perhaps meant as satirical portraits, though they are difficult for the reader to relate to.

In the description of the characters Dabydeen uses a leitmotif technique: Mr Bhairam at his harmonium, Gocolram with his cryptic replies and his 'beguiling smile', Devan with his 'unctuous smile'. This would work well in a short story, but the length of this book makes the frequent appearances of these motifs increasingly irritating.

Devan's many enterprises, which are doomed to end in failure because they are governed by fate, form the backbone of the story. Devan wanders in and out of marriage, family, jobs, and power centres, with his head in the sky, and experiences some very embarrassing and funny reverses, but he never really loses courage or belief in himself and his high mission. His attitude to women, which he claims to have got from the Mahabharata: 'woman is an all-devouring curse', is appalling, as is his inflated ego, but the reader still follows him on his wanderings with interest and sympathy, laughing at him at times, but never gloating, and commiserating with him over his discomfiture.

Technically it is a most beautiful book, bound in sari material, and this little Indian piece of luxury helps the reader bear with the many printer's errors.

Olive Senior, *Summer Lightning and Other Stories*. Longman, London, 1986. 134 pp. £2.95.

This is the most exciting collection of short stories to come out of the Caribbean for a very long time and it places Olive Senior in the front rank of short-fiction writers.

Most of the stories are set in an isolated village in the mountainous part of rural Jamaica. With deft attention to detail Olive Senior draws for us a picture of the village and its inhabitants. It is not a romanticized picture; the meanness, hypocrisy, prejudices, coldness, and lack of love as well as the poverty are there for all to see. But neither is it just one long tale of woe and misery. We feel the excitement and the sense of community as one family meets another, and the procession swells as the groups join up on their way to the annual Harvest Festival and all the treasures it offers. In particular, we are made to feel the excitement and terrible sense of urgency of the small boy who is obsessed with one idea only, to taste ice-cream. The boy's need becomes ours, his frustrations ours, his eventual moment of triumph followed by 'tragedy' ours. This small drama is played out against the accompanying one of his father. The two are closely interlocked and we see the child as innocent victim of adult forces beyond his control and comprehension.

Dominating this world and the world of the majority of the stories is that of the child. We are presented with the picture of a lonely, isolated child trying to make sense of the adult world, in a number of the stories not just one adult world but two. The confusion and loneliness of the child is exacerbated because s/he (in some stories the child is a boy, in others a girl) moves or *is* moved between two worlds. In 'Summer Lightning' the boy is 'plucked' from the world of the rural village which, in spite of its poverty, 'was small and smug' and 'mistakenly placed in the upper middle-class world of his relatives which was like a suit many times too large and to which he could never have hopes of growing to a perfect fit'. The child's alienation (s/he is a bastard in both societies) is symbolically portrayed by the wrong colour of skin, shape of nose, and colour and texture of hair: too dark for one world, too light for the other.

One of Olive Senior's great gifts is her ability to enable us to enter imaginatively into the mind of the child. We feel the child's loneliness, the desperate attempts to comprehend seemingly incomprehensible situations, to explain about love and the coldness engendered by the rejection of love.

Most moving and frightening of all is the adult's ability to create situations of such utter despair and disillusion for the child that bitterness triumphs over hope and love is destroyed. One is reminded in more than one of the stories of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*.

What little love there is in this world is manifested by the outcasts, Miss Rilla, Poppa D, Blue Boy, and Bro Justice. These are the free spirits who defy convention and demand a right to their own existence, the only people who are able and are permitted to enter the fantasy world, created by the child, as a survival strategy, a world of mysteries which 'occupied different spaces [and] transcended dimensions'.

The child's main oppressor may be adult conformist society, but over and above that there is a more ominous and sinister force: religion. The epigraph to the story 'Confirmation Day' is a quotation from Rilke: 'Who, I cried, would hear me among the angelic orders?' There is no doubt that Olive Senior would reply, 'No-one.' Admittedly, where religion is concerned, there are a few wry touches, for example in 'Do Angels Wear Brassieres?', but generally we find in the stories a repudiation of religion and its God. This repudiation is of Christianity in general but the most savage criticism is directed at

the established Church. In the Caribbean, as in other parts of the British colonial and post-colonial world, religion has colour as well as class overtones, and Olive Senior carefully establishes these links. 'The clouds of terror' which harbour 'the terrible reality of Him' symbolize the power and destructive force of the establishment, both social and religious. In 'Confirmation Day' the ceremony supposedly marks the child's rites of passage, not only into adulthood and the established Church, but also into her grandmother's upper-class world. That may be the intention of the Church and the grandmother, but it is not that of the child, for 'being a child of God is too frightening'. The absence of clouds in the sky symbolizes the child's rejection of both.

One of the most important themes in the Caribbean has been the theme of childhood and the growth of the child from innocence to maturity. *Summer Lightning* is an important and original addition to the works that deal with this theme.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

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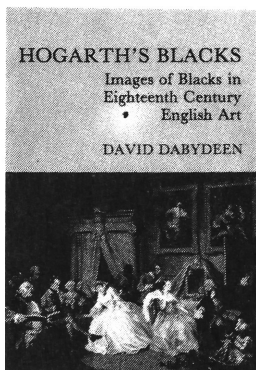
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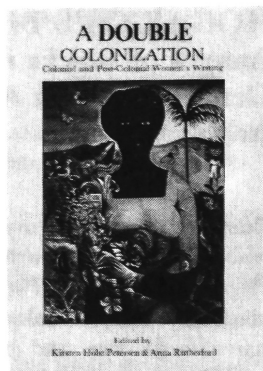
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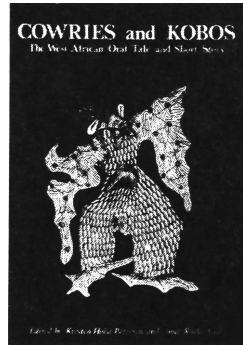
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